Terrence G. Kardong

The Life of St. Benedict by Gregory the Great

Translation and Commentary

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"In Terrence Kardong's many contributions to the explication of and commentary on St. Benedict's Rule, we have always found the sharp and well-worded wisdom that opens the Rule and the human heart to the truth of each other. That same sharp wisdom and clear perception of humanity is now brought to Gregory the Great's life of St. Benedict. 'Our contention throughout this commentary,' Kardong says, 'is that these stories are "true" even if they never happened.' Kardong's commentary goes deeper than what the stories say to reveal Gregory's intent to bring the reader to love Benedict and Gregory's skill in shaping each narrative and the overall narrative to give the reader a sense of continuity. And there is large truth here—the truth of Christ, of Benedict, of human persons and humanity."

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Concordia College
Moorhead, Minnesota

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"Fr. Terrence Kardong brings to his study of Pope Gregory's *Life of Benedict* the same critical eye and balanced judgment that he brings to the Rule of Benedict. His commentary and footnotes situate Gregory's work in the context of early medieval hagiography while alerting the reader to the issues of contemporary research. Kardong presents a calm perspective on the debate about Gregory's authorship of *Dialogues II*. His commentary fills a gap in American Benedictine scholarship."

—Abbot Jerome Kodell, OSB
Subiaco Abbey
Subiaco, Arkansas

The Life of Saint Benedict
by Gregory the Great

TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

Terrence G. Kardong, OSB

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To Sister Ruth M. Fox, Prioress,
and the Sisters of Sacred Heart Monastery,
Richardton, North Dakota

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Preface

The genesis of this book lies in a remark made by a friend of mine who happens to be prioress of a Benedictine community of women. She said that when she is asked by her sisters for a good book to read on the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory, she does not know what to recommend. She added that I might be the one to remedy that sad situation.

As for me, I cringed at the thought of writing a commentary on this material. Anyone who has used my technical commentary on the Rule of Benedict knows that I studiously avoided all cross-references to Gregory's *Dialogue II* in that study. I kept the two things apart because I think they are "apples and oranges," things of a different nature that are not to be mixed. Benedict's Rule is a *regula* and Gregory's *Dialogue* is hagiography.

Another thing that stood in the way of my undertaking this project is the simple fact that a good, popular commentary already exists for this material. The French savant Adalbert de Vogüé published a short, lively commentary in 1982 that could serve as a good tool for modern meditation.[2] In fact, the same scholar produced a major technical commentary on the *Dialogues* that underlies his popular summary.[3] Still, it could be that our own place and time could use a fresh take on the *Dialogues*. And so I set to work.

I might add that anyone who spends his life doing Benedictine studies probably ought to tackle *Dialogue II* sooner or later. After all, it is one of the most beloved texts for the whole Benedictine family, perhaps even more popular than the Rule itself. I even experienced a slight twinge of guilt for keeping this material out of my Rule commentary. So perhaps the present work can atone for that peccadillo.

How did I proceed? Like a typical exegete, I felt I should make a new translation. There really is no substitute for the commentator to work through the original language inch by inch. Since this is a popular work, I did not do this in order to create a philological commentary. Frankly, Gregory's Latin is so straightforward that it does not present any particular problems in this regard. I will admit that I did glance occasionally at Vogüé's French version in the *Sources Chrétiennes*. And I sometimes compared my work with that of the two Trappists, Hilary Costello and Eoin de Bhaldraithe, in *The Life of Benedict*. My general tendency is to render the text into shorter English sentences that suit the current American sensibility.

After creating a new translation, I was then ready to indulge in some interpretation. But in order to do that right, I felt I had to work through Vogüé's commentary in *The Life of Benedict*. I needed to do that because there was really no better way I could study the text as literature. The great contribution of Vogüé to the study of the *Dialogues* is his presentation of the literary sources and parallels to Gregory's work. Almost all the stories that Gregory presents have close analogues in the earlier and contemporary literature of that time. And no one knows that body literature like Vogüé. I do not always agree with his interpretation of these parallels, but one absolutely needs to take them into account.

Therefore, I have to admit that my work is heavily dependent on that of Father Vogüé. The casual reader may not pick that up from the main text of my commentary, but one who

follows the footnotes will immediately notice my frequent references to his scholarship. Of course, I could have done a broader study of other commentators, but I have not found most of them particularly helpful. Granted, this diminishes the scholarly quality of my work, but it is not meant for specialists.

One of the by-products of doing a comparative study of the *Dialogues* is that one comes away suspicious that perhaps Gregory has simply borrowed some of these stories from here and there to apply to his hero, Benedict. Of course, some of the episodes are very distinctive and bear the mark of authenticity, even eye-witness veracity. But we should also remember that ancient hagiography was not meant to convey a completely accurate biography. The purpose was to edify.

This can still create problems for the modern mentality, especially if it is of a critical cast of mind. The chief problem for us skeptics is the plethora of miracles. What are we to make of them? Many years ago I was privileged to take a class on *Dialogue II* from the master himself, Adalbert de Vogüé. One day I registered my acute discomfort with the endless string of miracles, serious and trivial. The French monk looked at me sadly and said in his deep voice: "Yes, the ancient monks loved miracles—but we hate them!"

I don't know if I hate miracles, but when they reach a critical mass, they do make me nervous. And since I have specialized in study of the Rule of Benedict, which mentions no miracles whatsoever, I really wonder whether Benedict thought they were so important. Of course, Gregory also is careful to instruct his interlocutor, Peter, that progress in the moral and the mystical life is of greater significance than physical miracles. But it is also quite clear that Gregory himself dearly loved miracles.

Or did he? There have always been scholars who wondered whether the *Dialogues* really were written by the great pope of

the sixth century. The most vigorous recent investigator of the question is Francis Clark, who thinks that the work was actually crafted in the seventh or eighth centuries. Clark suggests that it was done in the papal archives, sometimes from materials left there by Pope Gregory. Clark's argument is largely based on the fact that the *Dialogues* were not mentioned by any other writer for some decades after AD 600. But that gap is now being gradually closed by historians. And they also point out that Gregory's *Letters* contain plenty of interest in miracles.[4]

But even though these questions of historicity ("did it really happen?") are important for scholarly work, they are mostly out of place in a popular work such as this one. Therefore, I largely ignore them. I may register a certain amount of discomfort at certain stories, but so does Vogüé. Nonetheless, I try to keep firmly in mind that the purpose of this *Life of Benedict* is to build up the spiritual life of the reader and especially to make her love St. Benedict. And so I strive to uncover the spiritual message of each story. If I do that well, then the work was worthwhile.

Finally, a word about the numbering employed in this translation. The Roman numerals found within the text are taken from the traditional Latin text. I have followed the numeration in the critical Latin text of Vogüé that I translated.[5] These Roman numerals are followed by subdivisions indicated by Arabic numbers. But the translation and commentary is also divided into sections.* I have labeled these as section 1, section 2, and so on, precisely in order to avoid confusion with the internal numbers in the text.

Assumption Abbey,
Richardton, ND
March 19, 2007

The young Benedict leaves his home in Norcia to pursue his liberal education in Rome. Int-1

Section 1

Conversion and First Miracle

INTRODUCTION

1 There was a man of venerable life, who was Blessed (Benedictus) in both grace and name. From the time he was a boy, he had the heart of an elder. In his way of life he surpassed his age level in that he did not give himself over to sensual pleasure. While he was on this earth he could have indulged himself freely, but he despised the glory of the world as a faded bloom.

Born of free parents in the region of Nursia, he was sent to Rome for a liberal education. But when he saw that some of his classmates were plunging into vice, he withdrew his foot that he had just placed on the threshold of the world. He was afraid that worldly knowledge might cause him to fall into the depth of hell. So, abandoning his literary studies, and leaving his family home and inheritance, he sought to please God alone. He went looking for a monastic habit so that he could lead a holy life. Thus he left Rome learnedly ignorant and wisely uninstructed.

2 I don't know all his deeds, but I will recount a few things I learned from four of his disciples. They are Constantine,

a very respected man who succeeded him as superior of the monastery (Monte Cassino): Valentinian, who was head of the Lateran monastery for many years. Simplicius, who ruled as third abbot over his community; and also Honoratus, who is still superior of the monastery where Benedict began his monastic life (Subiaco).

1 When Benedict left school and decided to seek a remote place, his housekeeper, who loved him very tenderly, was the only one to follow him. When they came to a place called Effide, so many fine men welcomed them in charity that they stayed at the Church of St. Peter. Now the above-mentioned housekeeper asked the neighbor women for a sieve to clean some grain. She placed it carelessly on the table so it fell and broke in two. As soon as the housekeeper came back and saw it she began to weep bitterly, for the borrowed vessel was broken.

2 Since Benedict was a good and pious boy, he had pity on his housekeeper's sorrow when he saw her weeping. Taking the two halves of the broken sieve with him, he gave himself over to tearful prayer. When he rose from prayer, he found the sieve intact, so much so that he could see no trace of a break. He soon consoled his housekeeper, giving her the broken sieve in one piece. Everyone in town became aware of what had happened, and they were so impressed that they hung the sieve over the church door. Thus they and their descendents were reminded how perfect the boy Benedict was, even at the beginning of his religious life. It was there in plain sight over the church door for many years, right up to the Lombard invasion.

3 But Benedict wished to suffer the world's wrongs rather than its praises, and to be worn out by labors for God rather than flattered by worldly praise. So he quietly slipped away from his housekeeper.

COMMENTARY

The Life of Saint Benedict as told by Saint Gregory the Great (Pope 590–603) is part of a larger work called the *Dialogues*. It is the second of four *Dialogues*, and it is unique in that it focuses on only one saint whereas the other three *Dialogues* tell of many saints. These works of hagiography (lives of the saints) are called Dialogues because they are cast in the form of conversations between Pope Gregory and his deacon, Peter. Peter will speak first in *Dialogue II*, II, 4.

Dialogue II begins rather abruptly with Benedict leaving father and family "to please God alone." Very little is said about his parental home, although to judge from the fact that his sister, Scholastica, was a nun all her life (XXXIII, 2), it must have been a pious family. But Gregory does not want to emphasize pedigrees, he wants to stress conversion.

That is why he tends to portray the young Benedict in a rather harsh manner. We learn that as a boy he "had the heart of an elder." This does not necessarily endear him to the modern mind, but it means that he had the wisdom to choose God alone. Benedict's sudden departure from the familiar world reminds us of certain biblical figures, especially the disciples of Jesus abandoning nets and father at his invitation (Mark 1:16–20). Indeed, the whole tone of this introduction has a distinctly biblical sound.

In addition to the biblical theme, there may be autobiographical elements in Gregory's portrayal of Benedict.* Adalbert de Vogüé points out that the phrase "he went looking for the monastic habit" could well be a wry reference to Gregory's own regret that he himself had been too slow to take the habit. In his commentary called *Moralia in Job*, he says that he hesitated for about twenty years to actually enter the monastery. In contrast to himself, he shows Benedict acting decisively.

Vogüé also thinks that Benedict's desire for "the habit" is a sign that he knew that monasteries existed and wanted to join one. The obvious question then would seem to be: then why didn't he? As we will soon see, Benedict began monastic life as a hermit, a thing that he insists in his Rule that one should not do (RB 1). Still, Vogüé thinks that "the young seeker after God is not a freelancer."[9] I would suggest that what follows proves quite the opposite.

Furthermore we might be allowed some doubts about his flight from Rome. At least in Gregory's telling, Benedict turned his back rather abruptly on his education. Of course, he was disgusted at the decadence he found in the city, but his flight also cut him off at an early age from a complete education. Did he actually know what he was missing? There are some signs in what follows that Benedict had a somewhat narrow and rigid mentality. Indeed, Gregory indicates that Scholastica had to complete Benedict's education in his final years (*Dial. II.XXXVIII*).[10]

When describing his flight from Rome, Gregory introduces the memorable phrase "learnedly ignorant and wisely uninstructed." This tells us that a worldly education is not everything. Sometimes the simple and unlearned have profound understanding of the things of God. This is in fact a common theme in early monastic literature. Thus Athanasius tells us that Antony was a simple peasant, but wiser than the philosophers. Yet recent research suggests that Antony was in fact anything but uneducated.[11] And later on Gregory will claim that the Rule Benedict wrote is "remarkable for its discretion and limpid in its language" (*Dial. II.XXXVI*). Surely he must have had a decent education to do that.

The episode at Effide also shows Benedict as a rather decisive person. As soon as his miracle creates a sensation among the townspeople, he immediately slips out of town. Unfortunately, this involves abandoning his faithful housekeeper, who

we may feel deserved better. Perhaps this scene is somewhat like the miracle of Jesus at Cana (John 2:1-11).[12] In both cases the saint seems to treat a beloved woman rather harshly, but the reader is made to understand that the demands of the Gospel must override hurt feelings. Eventually, the scene with Scholastica (*Dial. II.XXXIII*) will serve as a corrective to some of this harshness.

Dum cerus inuidiæ clamour ruderentur horis
Rumpitur, et secto profugit ore Satan.
Et dum Romanus Benedicto sursa requirit,
Et solita obsequium strenuitate gerit.

News of Benedict's miracle spread throughout the country. To shun human acclaim, Benedict flees into the wilderness where he is fed and cared for by the monk, Romulus. [1.5]

Section 2

Hermit Lost and Found

1-3 He sought a retreat in a wild place called Subiaco about forty miles from Rome where there is a cold, clear spring. So abundant is the water that it first collects into a considerable lake and then issues in a river.

4 While he was fleeing, he met a monk named Romanus who asked where he was going. When he learned of his plan, he kept it secret and gave him help. He gave him the monastic habit and whatever help he could. When the man of God arrived at the place he wanted, he entered a narrow cave. He remained there three years, unknown to anyone but the monk Romanus.

5 This Romanus lived not far away in a monastery under the rule of Father Adeodatus. But he would piously steal some time under the very eyes of the superior. On certain days he would bring Benedict what food he could spare from his own portion. There was no path from the cell of Romanus to the cave because it was overhung by a high cliff. Romanus used to lower the food on a long rope from the cliff. He even attached a little bell to it so that at the sound of the bell the man of God would know when Romanus had brought some food.

Then he would come out and take it. But the old enemy was as jealous of the charity of the one as of the meal of the other. So one day when he saw the bread being lowered, he threw a rock and broke the bell. Romanus, however, did not cease to minister by other means.

6 Then almighty God wished to give Romanus some rest from his labors, and he also meant to show the life of Benedict as an example to the world. He would give light to all in the house like a lamp placed on a lamp stand. So the Lord appeared in a vision to a priest who lived some distance away. As he was preparing to eat his Easter dinner, the Lord said to him: "You cook delicacies for yourself while my servant suffers pangs of hunger in such and such a place." Immediately he got up and on the very feast day he went there with the food he had prepared for himself. He searched for the man of God among the cliffs, the valleys and the ditches. Finally he found him in his cave.

7 When they had said a prayer and blessed almighty God, they had a friendly conversation about life. Then the priest from afar said: "Come, let us eat, for today is Easter!" To which the man of God answered: "I know that it is Easter, for you have graced me with your presence." He was cut off from society so long that he had no idea that that very day was the solemnity of Easter. But the venerable priest again insisted: "Seriously, this really is the day of the Lord's resurrection! It is not right for you to fast, for I have been sent that we might eat the gifts of the all-powerful Lord." So, blessing God they ate dinner. When they finished eating and conversing, the priest went back to his church.

8 About the same time, some shepherds discovered him in his cave. When they spotted him covered with skins in a thicket, they thought it was a wild animal. But when they saw it was the servant of God, many of them were converted from their bestial ways to a life of holiness. So his name became

known to everyone in the neighborhood, and from then on he had a lot of visitors. They brought him food for his body, while they carried away in their hearts soul food from his teaching.

COMMENTARY

Benedict's hermitage at Subiaco was in the wilderness (*desertum* in Latin). It was in a cave high up on the wall of a deep ravine in the Abruzzi Mountains about fifty miles east of Rome. Even today this is an extremely picturesque area, but it is not too remote from civilization. In ancient times Emperor Nero found it so charming that he had the river Anio dammed up to form a lake in the Subiaco Valley. Probably Benedict crossed the bridge that still stood there in his day. In fact, the dam was only breached in 1305.[1]

But Benedict's retreat had nothing charming about it. He lived in great austerity, suffering from the cold and the hunger that come to anyone living alone in a cave. Soon enough he experienced another obstacle when the devil made an appearance. The evil one destroyed the little bell that the monk Romanus used to signal the arrival of food. That the devil should bother with this lonely hermit is no surprise to anyone familiar with earlier monastic literature.

We learn from the *Life of St. Anthony* that as he penetrated deeper and deeper into the Egyptian desert, the demons defended their territory with increased ferocity.[2] In the first chapter of his Rule for Monks, St. Benedict says of hermits: "Community support has taught them how to battle the devil, and this . . . enables them to venture out to the single combat of the desert" (RB 1.5). But the critical reader will wonder how Benedict of *Dialogue II* fits this description, for he had no training in a community.

Admitting that this poses a serious challenge to the commentator, Vogüé says that it is futile to attempt to reconcile

these two texts.[15] In his opinion, Gregory was not concerned to conform his portrait of the saint to what he read in his Rule. Indeed, some scholars have wondered whether Gregory actually knew the Rule of Benedict, since he never quotes it and several of his claims for Benedict contradict it.[16] Whatever the case may be, Vogüé says flatly: "The Life of Benedict and his Rule are two distinct things, two writings that propose the same end, but tend toward it by rather different routes."[17]

Having said that, Vogüé goes on to make a good argument that Benedict was an exceptional case. Because he was so spiritually gifted as a young man, he found himself burdened with the adulation of pious people (*Elhde*). In order to flee this extremely serious occupational hazard for spiritual progress, Benedict had to hide from people. When he comes to the novitiate, the ordinary monk flees from the world (*fuga mundi*). For his part, Benedict had to make a double flight. If he had gone to the monastery, he could well have been treated as a holy icon by the monks. So he had to hide in his cave.[18]

Nevertheless, God does not ordinarily allow exceptional holiness to remain hidden. "Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand" (*Dial.* 1.6; Matt 5:15-16). In the first of many divine visitations in *Dialogue II*, God commands a distant priest to take his Easter dinner to poor Benedict, who is starving in his cave. This priest, who is not named, has never heard of Benedict, but he goes looking for him. When he finds him and urges him to share his Easter dinner, the man of God replies "I know it is Easter for you have graced me with you presence."

In other words, Benedict has no idea that it is Easter Sunday! At this point, the pious reader might be excused a bit of scandal. How could this fervent disciple of Jesus be so cut off from the liturgical life of the church that he did not know it was Easter? At this point, someone might invoke the opinion of John Cassian that for monks there is no Lent (because it is

always Lent)."[9] At any rate, this strange detail serves to drive home the point that Benedict has indeed hidden himself very well from the world.

But Benedict's rather graceful and even playful remark also deserves some comment. When he says that it is Easter because the priest has visited him, he shows that he understands very well what Christianity is all about. Even a primary liturgical feast such as Easter is still symbolic of the bedrock Christian claim that Jesus died and rose out of love for the world. So the basic meaning of this paschal event is love. Where there is love, the fruit of Jesus' resurrection is found. So even without the Easter Liturgy, Benedict knew that the spirit of the Resurrection was present in their shared meal.

According to Gregory, the priest was not the only one who found Benedict after three years. Some of the local shepherds also spotted him, even though he was "covered with skins in a thicket" (*Dial. II* 1.8). This discovery is not hard to imagine, since shepherds have to follow their sheep into wild places. And they have to have sharp eyes for wild animals as well. But Gregory's comment that they were "converted from their bestial ways" (*a bestiali mente mutate sunt*) should not be taken too literally. He probably had the typical urban disdain for shepherds, a thing that the gospel writers did not share.

Indeed, the scene of shepherds discovering the hidden saint can hardly fail to remind us of the visit of shepherds to the manger at Bethlehem (Luke 2:15-20).[10] Of course, Benedict is no helpless infant, but he shares with Jesus his hiddenness. And just like the shepherds in Judea, those in the Abruzzi broadcast the wonderful thing they had found. So the hidden phase of Benedict's life comes to an end—because God wants it to. Benedict does not advertise his holiness. Far from it! He hides it as deep as he can, but it is no use. God has other ideas for him.

Fœtida profligat meretrix sumtuchea procaris
Non ense, aut arcu, sed prece, cepre, fame.
Cautidus occupat inter sanctæ omne cruentat
Corpus, ab ostesta mente sepelit. anem.

To overcome the temptation of the evil one, Benedict casts himself in a patch of thorns and briars. [II-2]

Section 3

Temptation in the Desert

11-1 One day when he was alone, the Tempter put in an appearance. For a little black bird, commonly called a *merola*, began to flutter about his face. It approached so close to his face that the holy man could have caught it in his hand if he had wished. But he made the sign of the cross and the bird flew away. When the bird departed, the holy man experienced a temptation such as he had never had before. Some time before he had seen a certain woman, whom the Evil Spirit now brought before his mind's eye. At this vision, such a flame seared the mind of the servant of God that he could scarcely endure the fire of lust in his breast. A victim of lust, he almost decided to desert the hermitage.

2 Suddenly, favored by grace from above, he came to his senses. Seeing a thicket of briars and nettles growing close at hand, he stripped naked and threw himself into the sharp thorns and stinging nettles. He rolled in them for a long time and as a result was scratched from head to toe. The physical wounds on his skin removed the wound of his mind, for it converted lust into sorrow. By means of an external punishing fire, he snuffed out what unlawfully burned inside. So he conquered sin by switching fires.

3 From that time forward, as he later testified to his disciple, the temptation to lust was so stifled within him that he never again felt anything similar. After that, many men began to leave the world and hasten to his tutorship. Free from the temptation of vice, he was really a master of virtue. We learn from the Law of Moses that Levites had to be over twenty-five years of age to minister, and from age fifty they became keepers of the holy vessels.

4 PETER: This Scripture text (Num 8:24-25) gives me a glimmer of understanding, but I beg you for a fuller explanation.

GREGORY: It's obvious, Peter, that one is very subject to carnal temptations during youth, but after age fifty the heat of the body cools off. The sacred vessels are the minds of the faithful. When the elect are still being tempted, they should be subject to service, and worn out by discipline and labor. When they have arrived at a calm state of mind, they are guardians of the vessels, that is, spiritual directors.

5 PETER: What you say makes sense. But now that you have unlocked the secret of this text, please continue telling the life of the just man as you began to do.

GREGORY: With the waning of temptation, the man of God, like a field cleared of briars, brought forth a bumper crop of virtue. When his exemplary life became known, his name became famous.

COMMENTARY

After Benedict has settled into his cave at Subiaco and even begun to attract some local attention, Gregory records a second temptation. Whereas his first temptation at Effide was to vainglory in the wake of local enthusiasm, now he is beset with the vice of carnal lust. This second episode is much more violent than the first, but Vogüé thinks the basic pattern is

the same. In both cases Benedict is tempted, he overcomes the spiritual obstacle and as a result his spiritual influence is broadcast.[2]

Anyone who has read *Dialogue II* remembers the story of the roll in the bramble bush. In order to distract himself from his raging imagination, Benedict deliberately hurls his naked body into a thicket of thorns. The result is predictable: plenty of cuts and scratches! But there is another result that is less ordinary: for Gregory says that from that time on the saint was never troubled by lustful thoughts. In other words, his violent method resulted in a final solution: no more lust.

To someone like me, who has long passed age fifty and still remains quite suggestible to erotic stimulation, this could look like just another idealized episode in the life of a saint. After all, hagiography is meant to edify us more than tell the exact, graphic truth about the saint. In the story, Benedict is only twenty-five years old, so it does seem rather early for a complete reduction of his libido. And of course Dr. Sigmund Freud and his colleagues would certainly scoff and tell us that nobody arrives at a place where sex is no longer a preoccupation.

There is another approach that sidetracks some of this skepticism and leads us to spiritual insight. Vogüé notes that Benedict's lacerations could remind us of the passion of Jesus Christ himself. Of course, there are significant differences. For example, Benedict essentially punishes himself whereas Jesus is brutalized by the soldiers. But if we consider Benedict's self-laceration as a kind of passion and death to sin, then we can consider his freedom from further lust as a symbol of the resurrection of Jesus. To quote Vogüé, "Purified, immunized, his flesh participates in the incorruption of the resurrected."[3]

And there are numerous resonances here with other spiritual literature. For example, notice that the following items

all appear in the story: birds, thorns, good earth, abundant harvest.[23] What does that suggest? Of course, the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4–15 and parallels). Probably the predominant feature of this gospel parable is the remarkable harvest that results despite all the factors that could have ruined it. So with Benedict. Gregory wants us to understand that he did not become a great saint without a terrific struggle. Even though he was a precocious youth, his was not clear sailing to the spiritual heights.

Another fruitful comparison concerns Benedict and Antony.[24] We know that the latter was subjected to considerable harassment by the demons in the first part of his life as a hermit. This tempting included the allurement to lust.[25] But Antony's temptation was of a different sort than that of Benedict in that it was much less violent. It lasted longer, but Antony never seems too hard pressed. He serenely overcomes the challenge and moves on.

As for Benedict, Gregory does not mind telling us that he was by no means serene. The very fact that he was already planning to leave his cave shows that he was sorely tempted. He probably knew where he could find the woman of his fantasies. It was only the timely arrival of divine grace that enabled him to escape from this delusion. But his almost suicidal plunge into the brambles leaves no doubt that he was deeply troubled. He was not a plaster saint but a hot-blooded man.

When Gregory tells us that Benedict's victory over lust permanently "immunized"[26] him against sexual turmoil, he does not imply that he was therefore beyond *all* temptation. In fact, the rest of *Dialogue II* reveals a person who was faced with a panoply of trials throughout his life. Clearly, some of these were due to defects of character that had to be gradually overcome.

But to return to the issue of lust and its "final solution." Modern notions of psycho-spiritual development probably

make it hard for us to appreciate this point. Even though sexual impulses are powerful and often hard to control, they are by no means purely evil, and they may even be described as indispensable. Indeed, it is generally agreed that a good deal of our creative energy stems precisely from our sexual drives. To be "relieved" of our libido could well leave us in a passive and lazy condition.[37]

We should also notice that the temptation story is bracketed with an introduction and a closing. Just before the onslaught of lust, Benedict is harassed by a little black bird that he shoos away with the sign of the cross. In the code language of spiritual discourse, black is the sign of the evil one, who is here making a preliminary survey of his victim. Later, a little black boy will bother the monks at the Divine Office (*Dial* II.IV.2). In our day of political correctness, it is no longer acceptable to use black to equal evil. As for Gregory, he had no such scruples.

As regards the closing, it takes the form of the first true dialogue in this particular book. Peter the Deacon reacts to a remark of Gregory about the need for Levites to be at least twenty-five years old, and fifty years old to touch the vessels of the altar. As we proceed, we will see that Peter's questions are usually connected with Scripture. He wants Gregory to explain the symbolic sense of the biblical text. In fact, Gregory does this all the time in his numerous Scripture commentaries. This particular interpretation of Numbers 8.24-25 is developed at much greater length in *Moralia in Job*, 23, 21.[38]

Gregory makes the not-very subtle point that the vessels must refer to the souls of the faithful. Those who take up the task of spiritual direction must be persons with a good deal of lived experience. Even though the Levites could do certain jobs at age twenty-five, it was not until much later that they could touch the vessels. Likewise, a director should be at least fifty years old. In an age when most people were dead by age

Shepherds also discover Benedict's hiding place, recognize him as a man of God and bring him food. [1-8]

fifty, one wonders how many directors that would leave? Still, the point is well taken: spiritual direction requires considerable personal experience of the spiritual life.

In that case, Benedict must have been an exception, because he became a rather famous spiritual guide soon after the miracle of the thorns. There are always exceptions to these rules. But in another sense, Benedict was not an exception because he did not become a spiritual master without considerable personal suffering. Gregory makes it clear enough that there is no route to Christian holiness that does not lead through the cross. Jesus was not exempted from it and neither are we.

Pregnãt ẽcunctis Benedictum ira duce potum
Salutis vitreos, sic fide uẽ ore minis.
Cumq; dum miseri spernunt documenta venene
Sponsis calcei, perdere atroce student.

Benedict leaves his solitude to be the superior of a monastery. Resentful of his attempts to curb their waywardness, his monks poison his wine; but the pitcher containing the wine shatters when Benedict blesses it. [III-4]

Section 4

Temptation among Men

111 – 1 GREGORY: With the waning of temptation, the man of God, like a field cleared of briars, brought forth a bumper crop of virtue. When his exemplary life became known, his name became famous.

2 There was a monastery nearby, and the father of the community had died. So the whole community came to the same venerable Benedict and begged him with earnest petition to become their leader. He put them off for a long time, predicting that his life would not square with theirs. Finally, worn down by their entreaties, he consented.

3 When he looked to the regular life of that monastery, and would not allow them to deviate to the right or the left of the monastic path as before, the monks under his rule grew furious. They began to accuse each other of asking him to lead them, for their miserable way of life was the direct opposite of his uprightness. They saw that under this man the unlawful would not be lawful for them, and it pained them to leave aside their habits. It was hard for them to have to change their attitudes. For the life of the good is always a heavy

burden for those with bad habits. So they tried to figure out a way to kill him.

4 After some plotting, they poisoned his wine. When the glass vessel carrying the poisoned drink was brought according to monastic custom to the seated Father for his blessing, he extended his hand and made the sign of life. He broke the vessel with this sign, and it was so shattered that it was as if he had thrown a stone at that vessel of death instead of the sign of the cross. Instantly the man of God knew that the drink was poisoned, because it could not bear the sign of the cross. He arose at once, and with a calm face and a tranquil mind said to the gathered brothers: "Brothers, may almighty God have mercy on you! Why have you wished to do this to me? Did I not tell you that our ways do not mesh? Go find yourselves a superior according to your own thinking, for after this you cannot have me."

5 Then he returned to his beloved place of solitude, where he lived alone with himself but under the gaze of the Heavenly Spectator.

PETER: I don't quite know what it means to "live with oneself."

GREGORY: If the holy man had wished to dominate long over those plotting against him, who had a very different way of life, it may have exceeded his strength. And the eye of his mind may have lost the light of contemplation. Worn out by the daily undiscipline, he would have neglected his own soul: he would have lost himself without finding them. For every time we are drawn outside ourselves by too much mental agitation, we are not "with ourselves," even though we think we are. Because when we wander here and there we do not see ourselves.

6 Do we say that that man was "with himself" who went to a distant land? He used up the inheritance he had received, and attached himself to one of the local

inhabitants. He sent him to feed his pigs, and he craved for himself the pods he saw them eat. When he began to think of the good things he had lost, it is written of him: "... when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare . . .'" (Luke 15:17). If he was "with himself," how could he return to himself?

7 I would say that this venerable man "lived with himself" because he was always on guard and watchful. He was always aware of being before the eyes of the Creator. He was constantly examining himself and he did not let the eye of his mind wander about.

8 PETER: What about the apostle Peter? It is written of him when he had to be led out of prison by an angel: "And Peter came to himself, and said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting'" (Acts 12:11).

9 GREGORY: We are led out of ourselves in two ways, Peter. Either we sink beneath ourselves by a mental lapse, or we rise above ourselves by the grace of contemplation. So he who fed the pigs fell beneath himself by unclean wandering of the mind. But he whom the angel freed and swept his mind away in ecstasy was out of himself, yes. But he was above himself. Both returned to themselves: the one returned to his heart from erroneous work; the other returned from contemplative heights to his previous state of mind. Therefore, venerable Benedict dwelt with himself in that solitude when he guarded himself in a mental cloister. For every time the ardor of contemplation wrapt him on high, he left himself behind. Of that there is no doubt.

10 PETER: What you say is clear. But I ask you, should he have abandoned the brothers once he had taken responsibility for them?

GREGORY: In my opinion, Peter, a bad group should be patiently borne with if some good people are found among them. Where there is no profit from the good, the trouble one experiences from the bad is useless. This is especially true where there is work at hand that can bear better fruit for God. Whom should the man of God have guarded when he saw they were all against him?

11 I must not neglect to say this: When perfect souls see they are working in vain, they often move to a place where they can have some effect. So also that famous preacher, who wished to die to be with Christ and for whom to live is Christ and to die is gain—he not only sought bitter sufferings for himself, but urged others to suffer them as well. But when he was persecuted at Damascus, he was able to escape by being let down (from the wall) in a basket at the end of a rope. Do we say that Paul feared death? He says he desires it for the love of Christ! But when he saw there was heavy labor with little success for him in that place, he kept himself for fruitful labor in another place. For the brave warrior of God did not wish to be cooped up; he sought the battlefield.

12 The same goes for venerable Benedict. If you listen carefully, you will soon see that he abandoned the stubborn when he was alive so he could raise people in other places from spiritual death.

PETER: It is as you say. And both the principle you state and the apt example you give prove it. But I beg you return to the life story of so great a father.

13 GREGORY: When the holy man continued to grow in miracles and virtue in the wilderness, many people gathered in that place to serve almighty God. And thus, with the help of our all-powerful Lord Jesus Christ, he built twelve monasteries. To them each he sent twelve monks with a superior. He kept a few at his side who he thought still needed his guidance.

COMMENTARY

In this section we will comment on the story of Benedict and the monks of Vicovaro. It is a rather short story, followed by a long stretch of dialogue between Gregory and Peter. This is by far the most extensive piece of interpretation by Gregory that we have encountered so far. Benedict's experience at Vicovaro was shocking. Why would a group of decadent monks choose an ascetic hermit for their superior? And why would they plot to kill him as soon as he thwarted their lax ways? Gregory offers no explanation for this, nor does he provide much psychological buildup for the tragic climax. It is as if he almost needs something this violent to drive Benedict back to his place of contemplation at Subiaco, and in a hurry.

As to why the cenobitic monks would choose an ascetical hermit for their leader, Vogüe does not think this was out of the ordinary. After all, both types of monks share the same basic ideals. And he adds: "For ancient cenobitism, the abbot was above all the model and promoter of self-denial."[39] That may be so, but an abbot also has to have a pastoral sense and this story leaves us wondering whether Benedict had one at this point in his young career. Probably his rigidity helped provoke the crisis at Vicovaro. Since he was a successful abbot soon after, he must have learned a lesson here.

Like many things in the *Dialogues*, this story seems to lack a social or historical context. The question that lingers in the back of our minds is this: would not such vicious behavior have repercussions? Would church authorities not move to disband such a dysfunctional religious community? None of this is dealt with, presumably because Gregory is not interested in creating a rounded and plausible history. He is just interested in charting the spiritual development of Benedict.

As it stands, the story has no parallels in pre-Benedictine monasticism.[30] Things like this may have occasionally happened during the Middle Ages, but I know of nothing quite so crass as this. In telling this story without any qualifying remarks, Gregory runs the risk of implying that such things were common in the sixth century. It is doubtful that he means to imply this, since the purpose of the *Dialogues* was to show that holiness was not uncommon in Italy at that time.

We have indicated earlier that there it is always useful to keep an eye on the parallels between the life of Benedict and that of the author, Gregory. As to the latter, he also found himself faced with a call to minister to the Christian people and his response was similar to that of Benedict: he fled. In 590, when Gregory had already retired to a monastery in Rome, he was elected pope. His immediate reaction was to hide himself from this terrifying responsibility. Of course he was found out, and served the church as its chief pastor from 590 to 604.

Obviously, there is a difference between flight from those who want to kill you and from those who want to make you pope. On the most elementary level, Benedict was simply running for his life from those murderous monks. Nevertheless, Peter the Deacon asks Gregory if it is really right to abandon a community once one has made a commitment to it. This may seem like an overly pious scruple, but it could reflect Gregory's own regrets at the difficult task he has undertaken as pope.[31]

The last decade of the sixth century was not an easy time to be pope. For most of his pontificate, the savage Lombards were besieging the city of Rome, creating a chaotic situation. Gregory was virtually the mayor of the city, responsible for feeding crowds of refugees and maintaining the spiritual morale of the whole population. No wonder that he found it hard to bear his heavy burden.

In response to Peter, Gregory gives two answers, one somewhat pragmatic, the other more spiritual. First he says that no one has the obligation to persevere in a ministry where there is no prospect for success. He then quotes the example of the apostle Paul, who fled Damascus when the Jews conspired to assassinate him (Acts 9:20-25). He escaped the place, not out of fear but because God had much more work in mind for him. Likewise with Benedict: he was just a young man at Vicovaro, with a long future of fruitful ministry before him.

Just how fruitful that ministry was becomes immediately apparent. For as soon as Benedict returns to Subiaco, people began to flock to him. And not just pious Christians, but men intent on becoming his monastic disciples. Almost overnight he is able to found twelve monasteries of twelve monks each. No doubt these round numbers are meant to be symbolic, not literal. Still, the point is the same: Benedict's decision to flee Vicovaro was the right one, and in doing so he became all the more spiritually effective. In other words, he was not evading responsibility at all but fulfilling it in an indirect way.

Why was Benedict suddenly so attractive to monastic candidates? The reason is connected to Gregory's second answer to Peter: Benedict was justified in fleeing the homicidal situation at Vicovaro because it would have been hard or impossible for him to maintain his prayerful recollection in that circumstance. No one can deny that it is hard to remain tranquil when they are trying to kill you! As it was, though, Benedict still managed to maintain his composure before he fled the place.

Here again, the autobiographical element becomes hard to avoid. Throughout the *Dialogues*, Gregory continually complains that he himself is having a very hard time maintaining his spiritual composure in the papacy. Beset as he is by

demands and challenges on every side, he has no tranquility, no *otium*, for contemplation. He longs for his monastery! But we should not be fooled by these remarks. Gregory was by no means overwhelmed by the papacy. His register of letters all over the Christian world shows him to be a brilliant administrator. How well he maintained his meditative practices is another matter.

Getting back to Benedict, Gregory tells us he became a fruitful spiritual master because he had mastered himself. But his growth was not just ascetic as it was before; now he became a master of the contemplative life. Gregory indicates this in the story by the extremely laconic expression: "He went to live with himself alone" (*secum habitavit*). In his commentary, however, Gregory greatly expands on what he means by this.

He proceeds in good scholastic fashion by making distinctions. To "be with oneself" is the opposite of being "outside oneself." But there are at least two ways to be "outside oneself." First, one can be "below oneself" like the Prodigal Son of Luke 15. He had to "return to himself" before he could return home to his father. On the other hand, the apostle Peter was "beside himself" (and above himself) with ecstatic joy when he was liberated from jail by an angel in Acts 12. He had to return to earth to make his escape; this was a step down. Likewise, Benedict was sometimes "beside himself" in ecstatic prayer although he "lived with himself alone."

This manner of discussing the spiritual life by means of prepositions was not new with Gregory the Great. The classical pagan writers already spoke of "living within oneself" in the sense of not being too concerned with what others think of us.[42] Gregory, though, goes much further, for he speaks of Benedict living "under the gaze of the Heavenly Spectator." No matter how secluded his retreat, Benedict understood well that God was always fully aware of him.

This description of the young Benedict can be seen as an important link to the Rule of Benedict. In the first step of humility, it reads: "Let each one take into account that he is constantly observed by God from heaven and our deeds everywhere lie open to the divine gaze and are reported by the angels at every hour" (RB 7.13).[31]

Pious noblemen leave their sons with Benedict to be schooled in the service of God. [III 14]

Section 5

Four Miracles at Subiaco

14 Then the pious and noble families of the city of Rome began to send him their sons to be educated for almighty God. Then too Ethicius and the patrician Tertullus sent their promising sons, Maur and Placid. Maur was a youth of good morals, who began to function as assistant to the master. As for Placid, he was still a young boy.

IV–1 Now in one of the monasteries that he built in that place there was a monk who could not stay at prayer. As soon as the brothers prostrated themselves in prayer, he would go outside, and his roaming mind drove him to do all kinds of worldly and trivial work. When his abbot had warned him often, he was brought to the man of God, who also chided him vigorously for his stupidity. When he returned to his monastery, he held to the warning of the man for scarcely two days. Then on the third day he reverted to his old ways: he began to wander around during prayer time.

2 The matter was reported to the servant of God by the father of the monastery, whom he had appointed. He said: "I will come and correct him myself." When the man of

God had come to that place, and the brothers had prostrated in prayer at the appointed time at the end of the psalmody, he saw the monk who could not remain at prayer. A little black boy was pulling him out by the hem of his garment. Then he said quietly to Pompelanus, the father of the monastery, and to Maur the servant of God: "Do you see who is pulling that monk outside?" They answered "No." He said to them: "Let us pray that you too see whom that monk is following." After two days of prayer, Maur could see, but the father of the monastery, Pompelanus, could not see.

3 The next day, therefore, after prayer, the man of God left the chapel and found the monk standing outside. He beat him with a stick for the blindness of his heart. From that day on, he suffered no further temptation from the black boy and remained immobile as he concentrated on prayer. So the Ancient Enemy did not dare to interfere with his thoughts. It was as if he himself had been struck a blow.

V–1 Of the monasteries that he had built in that place, three were on rocky heights. It was very hard for the brothers to get down to the lake for a drink of water, especially since the bank was so steep. Those who went down were terrified of the great danger they risked. So the brothers from those three monasteries got together and visited the man of God. They said: "It is difficult for us to go down to the lake every day for water. The monasteries should be moved from that place."

2 He calmed their fears and sent them away. That same night he climbed up to the heights with the little boy named Placid, whom I mentioned above. He prayed a long time up there, and when the prayer was finished, he placed three stones in that place as a marker. Then he returned to his monastery without telling anybody.

3 When these same brothers returned to him the next day because of the need for water, he told them: "Go

and dig a little at the point where you find three stones piled one on top of the other. For almighty God is even capable of producing water on a mountain top, and to kindly spare you the trouble of such a hard climb." They went to the peak that Benedict had pointed out, and found it was already damp. When they dug a basin, it immediately filled with water. It flowed out so strongly that to this day it runs abundantly and flows down from the mountaintop to the valley below.

VII–1 Another time, a certain Goth who was poor in spirit came to be a monk. The man of God, Benedict, gladly received him. One day he told them to give him an iron tool to cut thornbushes in a certain place. The tool is called a *falcastrum* because it is shaped like a sickle (*falx*). Benedict wanted to plant a garden there. Now the place that the Goth set out to clear lay on the very shore of the lake. When the Goth attacked the heart of the thicket with all his vigor, the iron blade slipped out of the handle into the lake. The water was so deep at that point that there was no hope of recovering the sickle.

2 So when the blade was lost, the trembling Goth ran to the monk Maur. He told him what he had lost and did penance for his fault. Maur the monk promptly reported the incident to the man of God, Benedict. When the man of God, Benedict, heard this, he went to the scene. He took the handle from the hand of the Goth and plunged it into the lake. At once the blade returned from the depths and entered the handle. Immediately, he gave it to the Goth and said: "Here it is. Return to work and do not be sad."

VIII–1 One day, while venerable Benedict was sitting in his cell, our boy Placid, a monk of the holy man, went out to the lake for a drink of water. He was careless in how he plunged his cup into the water, and fell in after it.

The current soon caught him and pulled him a bowshot from shore. Although the man of God was sitting in his cell, he knew right away what had happened. He quickly called Maur to him and said: "Brother Maur, run! The boy went to drink water, but he has fallen into the lake. The current has already carried him far out."

2 Then a wonderful thing happened, something unknown since Peter the apostle: when he had asked and received the blessing, Maur obeyed the order of this father and ran to the place where the boy was being carried by the current. He thought he was moving on land, but he actually ran on the water. He grabbed him by the hair and ran back to the shore. As soon as he touched shore he came to himself. He looked back and saw that he had run on the water. Then he was terrified at what he had done, for he would have never dared to do it.

3 He then returned to his father and reported what he had done. Venerable Benedict began to insist that the thing was not due to his merits, but to Maur's obedience. But Maur objected that the thing was accomplished solely by his command. He said that he had no part in the feat since he had acted unawares. But the boy who had been pulled out intervened as the judge of this friendly contest in mutual humility. He said: "When I was being hauled from the water, I saw the abbot's cape above my head and thought he was dragging me out of the water."

PETER: The things you tell are very great and will serve to edify many. The more I drink in the miracles of the good man, the more I thirst.

COMMENTARY

It would seem that these four miracles form a kind of cycle.[34] All of them are based on biblical and patristic models, which we will study here. None of them seems to move the basic plot

along, that is, they have a timeless quality about them. And all of them lack the dramatic quality of their biblical model. It is also interesting to see the Roman nobility sending their sons to Benedict for training, since he had abandoned his Roman education. So the uneducated one now educates.

The first miracle of the set deals with the devil's attempts to undermine the community. Specifically, he drags a certain monk out of chapel when the monks prostrate to pray at the end of Office. The local superior intervenes, but he cannot make any headway with the monk, and neither can Benedict himself. The solution comes after Benedict personally observes the devil at work on the monk. But the other monks cannot see this until they have prayed hard for the grace.

There may be a reference here to a passage where the prophet Elisha is threatened by a besieging army (2 Kgs 6:15-17).[31] He is not alarmed, though, because God allows him to see a yet larger army of the Lord protecting him. His servant cannot see it until Elisha prays God to let him in on the vision. In that sense, the servant is like Maur, who is able to see the devil after two days of prayer. Moreover, one of the secondary lessons of this miracle is that prayer is not to be set aside in the name of work. The monk who is dragged out of Office is found doing all kinds of useful things, but none of them are appropriate for this time. Most of us have found ourselves at times preferring busy work to prayer. There will always be things to do, but nothing must interfere with our relation to God.

The second miracle also appears to be at least loosely based on the Elisha cycle in 2 Kings. In this episode (2 Kgs 6:1-4),[32] Elisha's followers come and beg him to allow them to relocate on the banks of the river Jordan. He agrees readily enough, so they build new "monastery" out of wood on the shore. Benedict's monks have a similar idea: they are tired of hauling water from the lake up to their monasteries perched on the rocks at Subiaco. Unlike Elisha, Benedict refuses to

relocate the dwellings. Instead, he prays on the heights and water springs up for their use.

If we know our Old Testament well, this story may also remind us of Moses. When he was faced with a revolt of the Israelites in the desert (Num 20:1-13),[17] Moses was told by Yahweh to strike the rock with his rod for water. He foolishly struck twice, but that is beside the point here. Water indeed flowed and the rebellious people were pacified. A tense situation was resolved by God's miraculous intervention. As for Benedict's monks, they are not rebels. They make no threats, even though Gregory admits that they had good reason to question Benedict's building plans. They were not lazy either: they were just intimidated by the dangerous climb down the cliffs to get a drink. Anyone who has visited Subiaco knows that the cliffs there are very steep indeed. It is not hard at all to imagine the setting of this story.

The alert reader may notice that the whole matter of Benedict building a monastery has been largely elided by Gregory. We are simply told that he built twelve houses with twelve monks each. Obviously, these are symbolic numbers, but this does not deny the fact that he must have taken practical measures to house these people. He probably made good use of the abandoned buildings of the villa that Emperor Nero had built on the lake five hundred years earlier.[18]

At any rate, Gregory has created a rather peaceful, pastoral scene with this miracle. Abbot Benedict may refuse to move the dwellings, but he does not ignore the real needs of the monks. He goes quietly by night and engages in his most powerful activity, namely, prayer. The scene is anything but dramatic. The monks are simply told to dig a little pit and it will fill with water. No more dangerous climbing.

The lake figures again in the third miracle, and it is not a positive force. Now a monk is cutting brush on the shore when the blade of his scythe flies off into the water. There is

no question of retrieving it, for this is a deep, dangerous body of water. Unlike a modern workman, this monk does not merely report the accident and request a new tool. After all, accidents happen. No: Iron tools were rare and expensive in the sixth century. The monk is distraught and truly contrite when he reports to Maur. It should be noted that this monk was in a special category, for he was a Goth. Of course, Benedict's Rule forbids discrimination on the basis of race or status (RB 2.20). But in sixth-century Italy, the Goths were resented by the Italians as an invading "barbarian" element. So it is not hard to imagine that this man worried that he might be dismissed for this fairly serious faux pas.[9] Even though the Goths were notoriously fierce, this particular Goth is a model of obedience and humility.

Instead, Benedict again is compared to the prophet Elisha, who also dealt with a drowned axe* In 2 Kings 6:4–7. Like Benedict, he too was able to make the iron tool float to the surface, thereby saving the day for the individual and the community. But it would seem that Gregory has added a very telling touch to the end of this episode. Instead of admonishing the Goth to be more careful next time, Benedict remarks laconically: "Here it is. Go back to work and do not be sad!" It is a perfect pastoral response for a rather charged situation. And it also exemplifies very well a key theme from the Rule of Benedict: if at all possible, eliminate sadness in the community.[10]

Miracle four also involves the lake, and again it is a question of taking a drink. This time the boy Placid leans out too far to fill his cup and falls in. Before he can react, the swift current has carried him away. The lake of Subiaco could be a dangerous place. Fortunately for him, Benedict is aware of his plight, even though the abbot is sitting in his cell. Apparently he has become clairvoyant as a result of long training in the spiritual life in the wilderness.

At any rate, he does not personally run to Placid, but sends young Maur, his lieutenant. No matter how desperate the situation, Maur does not depart instantly but pauses for a blessing. Indeed, that blessing is crucial, because Gregory makes it clear that what follows is entirely due to Benedict's spiritual influence. Of course, the miracle is ultimately due to God.

What actually happens is so simple as to seem almost a caricature: Maur runs over the water to where the boy is drowning, grabs him by the hair and runs back to shore. When he does get back on land he suddenly "comes to himself" and is shocked at what he has just done. In other words, it was all done in a sort of trance, in which he had no real awareness. When he tells Benedict, though, the abbot says it was done under the power of obedience and therefore Maur was the agent. But little Placid settles the pious dispute by claiming he saw the abbot's mantel above him in the water—it really was Benedict's miracle.

What is the biblical reference here? It is no longer Elisha but now a New Testament figure: none other than St. Peter himself. Now we too remember that Peter was able to walk on the water to come to Jesus in the storm on the lake of Galilee (Matt 14:22).[42] Actually, Gregory explicitly singles out Peter as the model for this story, whereas he had never done that for Elisha.

While we are thinking of Peter, we might also relate an other aspect of the story to him. Perhaps we remember that in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 12:11),[43] Peter, like Maur, also "came to himself." He had been released from his chains in jail by an angel and led out through locked doors, all of this as in a dream. But finally he realized that it was not a dream at all but a miracle of God's great mercy.

At any rate, this miracle makes it clear that Gregory will not allow the focus of *Dialogue II* to stray away from Benedict.

Even though Maur is a good and obedient disciple, he is not the true agent of God's power in this story. Other people may act as Benedict's delegates, but he is the great saintly icon of this whole book. It may seem that Gregory has perhaps made this particular point a bit too lavishly. When we encounter one miracle after another, we moderns become a bit uneasy. Can Benedict really have been this extraordinary? Of course, there is no possibility of getting back to the historical reality here. And perhaps it is not necessary if we can let the myths carry the story of this holy man.

Florentius, a jealous priest, tries to poison Benedict's bread, but Benedict commands the raven to take the bread away. [VIII-3]

Section 6

A Blow to Hatred and a Coronation

VIII-1 GREGORY: Now the whole countryside became fervent in the love of Our Lord God Jesus Christ. Many left their worldly life to submit the neck of their heart to the sweet yoke of the Redeemer. Just as the wicked typically envy others their good virtue, but do not seek it for themselves, so it was with the priest Florentius. He was the pastor of the nearby church, the grandfather of our subdeacon Florentius. Driven by the malice of the evil one, he began to resent the efforts of the holy man and to disparage his way of life. He kept visitors away from Benedict as much as he could.

2 He saw that he was unable to keep him from progressing and that the prestige of his lifestyle was increasing. He knew also that many were constantly being attracted to a better state of life by the fame of his reputation. He was more and more consumed with burning jealousy because he wanted praise for his life—but not a praiseworthy life. So blinded was he by the darkness of his envy that he sent the servant of almighty God blessed bread, infected with poison. The man of God received it with thanks, but he knew what harm hid in that bread.

3 Now at dinner time a crow used to come from the adjoining woods and accept food from his hand. When it had come at the usual hour, the man of God threw the bread the priest had sent before the crow. And he commanded it: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, take this bread, and throw it in a place where no one can find it." Then the crow, with its beak open and its wings expanded, began to run in a circle around the bread and croak. It was as if it were saying that it wanted to obey, but could not carry out the orders. But the man of God urged it again and again: "Take it away! Do not be afraid! Throw it where no one can find it." After long hesitation, the crow took the loaf in its beak and departed. After three hours it returned minus the bread; and it received its daily ration from the hand of the man of God.

4 When the venerable father saw that the mind of the priest was inflamed against his way of life, he felt worse for him than for himself. But the above-mentioned Florentius, because he could not harm the master physically, bestirred himself to destroy the souls of his disciples. Before their eyes he sent seven naked girls into the garden of the monastery where Benedict lived. For a long time they did a round dance and romped before them. The whole purpose was to inflame their minds with the vice of lust.

5 When the holy man took this all in from his monastery, he was afraid that it could ruin his still-unformed disciples. He mused that it was done to harm him alone, so he decided to give way before envy. He placed all the monasteries he built, with their brothers, under their superiors. Taking a few monks with him, he changed his place of residence.

6 As soon as the man of God humbly ceded to his hatred, almighty God struck Florentius a terrible blow. The above-mentioned watched from his balcony as Benedict departed, and he was gleeful. But although the house stood firm,

the balcony he stood on collapsed. Thus the enemy of Benedict was crushed to death.

7 Because he had departed scarcely ten miles from the place, Benedict's disciple Maur thought he should inform him immediately: "Come back, for the priest who was persecuting you is dead." When the man of God Benedict heard this, he gave himself over to serious laments, both for the death of his enemy and for the joy of his disciple at the death of his enemy. For this reason he imposed a penance on his disciple because he dared to display such glee in announcing the destruction of the enemy.

8 PETER: The things you say are beautiful and quite amazing. I see Moses in the water produced from the rock, Elisha in the iron brought up from the watery depths, Peter in the walk on the water, and David in the grief at the death of an enemy. When you think of it, this man was full of the spirit of all the just!

9 GREGORY: Peter, the man of God, Benedict, had only the spirit of the One who, by the grace gained by the redemption, filled the hearts of all the elect. Of him, John says: He was "the true light that enlightens every man . . . coming into the world" (John 1:9). And again it is written of him: ". . . from his fullness have we all received . . ." (John 1:16). For saints of God may have powers from God, but they cannot pass them on to others. The Lord gave the signs of power to his subjects, but to his enemies he promised he would give the sign of Jonah. So he wished to die before the eyes of the proud and to rise before the humble, that the former could look on the one to be condemned and the latter could look on what they had to love and venerate. By virtue of this mystery, while the proud gaze on the horror of death, the humble receive a glorious power over death.

COMMENTARY

The story of Benedict's persecution by the priest Florentius is another colorful episode that is rich with spiritual symbolism

But it is also much more than that. Since it forms the final experience of Benedict at Subiaco, Gregory makes sure that this story carries a special freight of significance. He does this by creating a many-layered symbolism and also by making sure that the story has a deeply Christian resonance.[14]

On the surface, the saga of Florentius is as fascinating as it is tragic. Here is a man of God who is so consumed by envy that he is driven to attempt murder. But like the monks of Vicovaro, Florentius is thwarted by Benedict's clairvoyance. We might think he would come to his senses at this, but instead he proceeds with a crazy scheme to ruin the young disciples of Benedict through sexual temptation. In the end, Florentius dies in a freak accident—except that God causes it.

As at Vicovaro, Benedict is faced with a lethal challenge and therefore tempted to anger. Again he transcends the natural tendency to avenge such a threat, to return violence with violence. Gregory says he "decided to give way before envy." From a "normal" point of view, this would seem to suggest cowardice. As at Vicovaro, Benedict would prefer to "switch rather than fight." In this case, his decision is extremely significant for he decides to leave Subiaco.[15]

Again one might wonder if this is such a praiseworthy decision. What is to become of the brothers, for he opts to leave most of them behind? Yet Gregory makes sure we know that Benedict is satisfied that the monastic structure he has created at Subiaco can perdure without his personal supervision. But more than that, it is made clear that the saint is leaving precisely *because* his presence seems to endanger the brothers. He sees that this is not just a threat to himself, but to the whole enterprise. The souls of others are also at stake, not just his own.

In this regard, the story really does represent a case of spiritual growth on the part of Benedict. When he walked away from the thuggish monks at Vicovaro, he did so in order to preserve his own contemplative calm. As for the monks,

they were left to their own devices. Now, however, Benedict walks away precisely in order to *save* the monks. In other words, charity has replaced individual asceticism as the basic motivation of the saint.

To turn back toward the wretched Florentius for a moment. It is a bit curious that Gregory does not hesitate to name him. Not only that, he tells us that he was the grandfather of "our subdeacon Florentius." Anyone who suspects that these stories do not concern real people is faced with this remark to explain. Apparently, Gregory is not too concerned with "political correctness." He believes in calling a spade a spade, even if feelings might be bruised and family honor tainted. Not only were those brutal times, the church itself could be corrupt. "The corruption of the best is the worst."

But of course the spotlight here is on Benedict. As he did at Vicovaro, he keeps his cool even in the face of attempted murder. The charming contretemps with the crow should not distract us from the harsh reality of the crime that takes place here. But we might also reflect that wild animals who become tame are a common symbol of the triumph of obedience. Since the man of God is completely docile to the will of God, so wild nature bows to him. This theme already surfaces with the raven who feeds the prophet Elijah at the Wadi Cherith (1 Kgs 17).[16]

Actually, Elijah is not the only Old Testament figure who functions as a type for Benedict in this episode. As Deacon Peter points out in the interpretive dialogue that takes place after Benedict departs, King David is also a model for the saint. This is so because both of them refuse to rejoice over the downfall of their enemy. Although King Saul unjustly persecuted David for years, causing him no end of trouble, when Saul is killed in battle, David is shaken with sincere grief (1 Sam 1:11-12).[17]

Likewise with Benedict, who refuses to rejoice at the tragic death of Florentius, even if it was caused by God. Indeed,

when Maur, who conveys the news to the recently departed, shows signs of glee at the turn of events. Benedict gives him a dressing down. He does not order him slaughtered, as David did with the young Amalekite who informed him of Saul's death. But he makes it perfectly clear that he does not hate Florentius, he only hates his sin. Earlier in the episode, Gregory says that Benedict "felt worse for (Florentius) than for himself." So love has become the main concern in this culminating episode.

It is worth our time to meditate further on this final story in the Subiaco cycle. Coming after a string of miracles, we should note that it is *not*, strictly speaking, a miracle. That is, there is no manipulation of nature as we see in the preceding stories, and also with the collapse of the balcony. Here what we have is a *moral miracle*, a triumph of grace over fallen nature.[49] For Benedict to spontaneously lament the death of his enemy shows that he has been thoroughly transformed into the image and likeness of God. The text that springs immediately to mind is "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

If anyone thinks it is unwarranted to bring in Christ to explain Benedict's reaction, then the response is that Gregory himself does just that. When Peter gushes that Benedict "was full of the spirit of all the just," Gregory quickly responds that the saint "had only the spirit of the One." And he goes on to pour out praises for Christ the Redeemer in the form of two quotes from the Prologue to the Gospel of John (John 1:9, 14). So Gregory wants to remind us that even in his hagiographical enterprise of glorifying the saints, it is still Christ who is the real focus of the exercise.

It is worth adding that Gregory here presents Benedict as more than a hero of nonviolence. True, he does refrain from returning evil for evil, but he does more than that. This is not just a matter of refusing to hate one's enemy. That in itself is a

major accomplishment, but it does not really come up to the ideal of the New Testament. The gospels do not present Jesus as simply refraining from retaliation: "... having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1).[9] He also loved his enemies to the end, and so did Benedict.

Templa colunt, stantes Pater alta montis,
Et nemore incenso, aut simulachra solo
Sustrem excellens Baptistam in Apollinis aram,
Martino ædiculam non sine laude sacrat.

Benedict arrives at Cassino where he destroys the temple of Apollo and builds a chapel in honor of St. John the Baptist. [VIII-II]

Section 7

Fight against Satan

10 PETER: After this, I ask you to tell me where the saint went and if he displayed any more miracles.

GREGORY: The holy man went to another place, but he had the same enemy. For after enduring such serious battles, now he found the master of evil fighting openly against him. Now the citadel called Casinum is located on the side of a high mountain. The mountain shelters this citadel on a broad bench. Then it rises three miles above it as if its peak tended toward heaven. There was an ancient temple there in which Apollo used to be worshiped according to the old pagan rite by the foolish local farmers. Around it had grown up a grove dedicated to demon worship, where even at that time a wild crowd still devoted themselves to unholy sacrifices.

11 When the man of God arrived, he smashed the idol, overturned the altar and cut down the grove of trees. He built a chapel dedicated to St. Martin in the temple of Apollo and another to St. John where the altar of Apollo had stood. And he summoned the people of the district to the faith by his unceasing preaching.

12 But the old enemy did not take all this in silence. He appeared openly to the eyes of the father, and not secretly in a dream. He complained so loudly of the violence he was suffering that the brothers even heard his cries, though they saw nothing. As the venerable father told his disciples, the old enemy appeared to his bodily eyes in a most hideous and flaming form. He seemed to menace him with mouth and eyes ablaze. They all heard the things he was saying. First he called him by name. When the man of God answered nothing, he quickly became abusive. He cried: "Benedict, Benedict," and when he saw that he was entirely unresponsive, he immediately added: "You are a cursed man, not a blessed one [Benedict]. What do you want with me? Why are you persecuting me?"

13 Now prepare to hear about some new attacks of the old enemy against God's servant. He wanted to harass him, but he unwittingly gave him more occasions for victory.

IX–1 One day, when the brothers were building the residences for the monastery, in the middle lay a rock that they decided to lift up and use in the construction. When two or three could not budge it, more hands were added. But it remained unmoved, as if rooted in the earth. It was obvious that the old enemy himself was sitting on it, since such a gang of men could not move it. Faced with this problem, they sent a message to the man of God to come and drive off the enemy with prayer so they could move the rock. He came at once and prayed a blessing. The rock was then lifted so quickly it was as if it weighed nothing at all.

X–1 Then it seemed to the man of God that they should dig in that place. When the brothers dug deeper, they found there a bronze idol. They threw it temporarily into the kitchen, but then it seemed that fire broke out, and in the eyes of all the monks the whole kitchen building was burning down.

Labitur ex muro Puer, impellente maligno,
Quem Pater ad uitam, mortis ab ungue trahit.
Dæmon ab egregio superatur Patre, puellus
fortior ad fabricam, quàm fuit ante, redit.

The evil one visits the monks at their work and overturns a wall that crushes under its ruins the body of a very young monk. Benedict restores the monk to life. [XI-1]

2 When they made a great uproar in dousing the fire, and just about had it out, the man of God heard the noise and came to investigate. He saw that the fire existed only in the eyes of the brothers and nowhere else. So he bowed his head first in prayer and then recalled the brothers to proper vision, for he saw that they were deluded by a false fire. So they saw that the kitchen building stood unharmed, and the flames fabricated by the old enemy disappeared.

XI–1 Again, the brothers were working on a wall that needed to be raised a bit. As for the man of God, he was engaged in prayer in his cell. The old enemy appeared to him in an insulting manner and told him he was going to go visit the brothers at work. The man of God immediately sent this message to the brothers: "Watch out, brothers, for the evil spirit is coming to you right now!" The messenger had scarcely said the words when the evil spirit overturned the wall they were building. A young monk, son of a senator, was crushed by the rubble. They were all grieved, positively distraught, not for the ruined wall but by the injured brother. With loud wailing, they rushed to inform blessed Father Benedict.

2 Then the same Father commanded the mutilated boy to be brought to him. They could only carry him in a blanket, since the stones of the collapsed wall not only smashed his flesh but his bones. The man of God immediately commanded him to be laid in his cell on the *psyatium* (prayer mat). He sent the brothers away and shut the door. He gave himself over to prayer even more intently than usual. Then a wonderful thing happened: at that very hour he sent the young man, healed and as vigorous as ever, back to the same work to finish the wall with the brothers. The old enemy had thought he could insult Benedict by his death.

COMMENTARY

Benedict's move from Subiaco to Monte Cassino is the turning point of Gregory's narrative. Although it is not halfway through the full extent of the story, nevertheless it constitutes the major structural juncture for the author. Up to this point, at Subiaco, the youthful Benedict has been gradually maturing in his spiritual growth. He has been sorely tempted by Satan, but he has won out in the end. Still, he has chosen to withdraw rather than engage in frontal combat with the evil one.

Now at Monte Cassino things will be different. Gregory now presents Benedict as a fully realized spiritual master. The devil is still vigorously present and active, but now Benedict parries his thrusts with ease. From now on, Benedict's life is presented as a continuous triumph abounding in good works and many miracles.[30] In a sense, this overwhelming spiritual power of Benedict reduces the drama in the story. Still, it is good to see God's power so evidently at work in a human being.

First a comment about Monte Cassino. The site is about seventy-five miles southeast of Rome and Subiaco. Like Subiaco, it is in the foothills of the Apennine Mountains, but aside from that the two places could hardly be more unalike. Subiaco is buried in a deep declivity, surrounded with high cliffs and gurgling with rushing water. Monte Cassino is situated on a bench in the mountains, with wide vistas all around. It is indeed a "city set on a hill" (Matt 5:14). To this day, the abbey is a beacon to all who travel between Rome and Naples.

When Benedict arrived at the place, it was dominated by a pagan temple. That was not unusual, for people have performed religious rites in prominent places since time immemorial. Therefore we are probably somewhat shocked to read that Benedict suddenly turned into a ferocious religious

zealot, tearing down the temple and cutting down the sacred grove of trees on the plateau. This behavior is not uncommon among the medieval Christian missionaries like Boniface, but we do not expect it from Gregory's pen. At the end of the sixth century, he sent the monk Augustine to England to reconvert the place. One piece of advice he gave him was to *not* destroy the pagan temples, but remodel them for Christian worship.[41] But here Gregory is just telling us what Benedict did, without moralizing on his tactics.

The reader may also be a bit surprised by the lack of resistance from the local pagans. Of course the devil howls and whines, but the country peasants (*pagani*) put up no resistance. Benedict immediately begins preaching to them and there is no indication that they are hostile. In fact, it looks as if he converted the whole district. But even his preaching is highly unusual for an ancient monk. By and large, the ancient monks were primarily intent on saving their own souls by lives of prayer and penance, not by apostolic work. And it has to be noted that this is the only time Benedict engages in pastoral activity in *Dialogue II*.[42]

To focus on the events reported by Gregory, we find that Benedict immediately sets out to replace the pagan structures with his own monastic buildings.[43] First he has his monks construct two small chapels, one dedicated to St. Martin and the other to St. John the Baptist. Since Monte Cassino was destroyed by bombing in the Second World War,[44] archeologists were able to discover the foundations of these chapels. They were of small dimensions, which is not surprising since Benedict was just getting reestablished.

At any rate, the old enemy becomes very active in opposing this new monastic building program. First he sits on a rock that needs to be moved. When Benedict prays, the rock becomes light as a feather. Next, Satan's tactics become more desperate: now he makes a stone wall collapse on top of a

young monk, killing him. Although the monks are deeply shocked, Benedict quietly resuscitates the lad and sends him back to work.

Since this miracle of raising a dead person to life is the most extraordinary wonder that a human being can perform, it is curious that Gregory makes so little of it. Indeed, until the final sentence he leaves it unclear whether the monk was actually dead. And even then Gregory does not elaborate on the miracle by means of dialogue with Deacon Peter. Vogüé suggests that Gregory may mute this miracle to better emphasize a second resuscitation that Benedict will perform toward the end of the book (*Dial.* II.32.3).[55]

Satan is very stirred up by Benedict's assault on his place of worship, and he has one more dirty trick up his sleeve. When the brothers dig up a pagan idol that Benedict intuits as being there, they rather casually throw it into the kitchen. But the devil pays them back with a spectacular kitchen fire. They rush to extinguish it, but Benedict tells them to calm down because the fire does not exist. It is merely a phantasm in their heads. As so often in the *Dialogues*, the man of God can see what others cannot see.

In all this building activity at Monte Cassino, the abbot plays an interesting role. He is not in the midst of the brothers hauling rocks and putting out fires; he is in his cell praying. In fact, Gregory shows him in this position no less than four times. When Satan wants to taunt him, he has to go to him in his seclusion to get at him. But Benedict's seeming aloofness should not be mistaken for passivity. Gregory makes it clear that his prayer is the driving force behind all the activity at the new monastery.

Someone who is in daily contact with the Bible will recognize that much that transpires in this initial episode at Monte Cassino has scriptural resonance. For example, when Benedict takes the broken body of the young man into his cell for secret

prayer, he is acting much like Elisha did with the dead child of the Shunamites (2 Kgs 4:32-33).[36] And Paul also healed a young man who was killed by falling out of a window during one of his interminable sermons (Acts 20:7-12).[37]

But Vogüé thinks that the main literary source for Gregory in this part of *Dialogue II* is the life of another early monk, namely, St. Martin of Tours. In his *Life of Martin*,[38] which was written about two hundred years before Gregory's work on Benedict, Sulpicius Severus tells us that Martin's career as a pioneer bishop in western Gaul was marked by fierce resistance. With Martin, unlike Benedict, the trouble came largely from the local pagans who resented Martin's attacks on their shrines.

The main difference between these two accounts is that Martin's struggle with paganism continues throughout his whole time as a bishop, that is, some twenty-five years. Gregory, however, concentrates the devil's resistance to Benedict at Monte Cassino mostly in these first few chapters. Consequently, the satanic activity in *Dialogue II* seems to be much more concentrated and intense. For the rest of his long stay at Monte Cassino, Satan only pays him sporadic visits.

When we note the dates of the two accounts, it is not so surprising that Benedict ran into less opposition than did Martin. By the time of Benedict, paganism was in a weaker condition in western Europe than it had been in Martin's time. And, of course, it must be remembered that Martin as a bishop was a much more prominent churchman than Benedict. This was an isolated and unusual episode in Benedict's monastic career. Martin, however, was thrust out of his monastery into the role of a missionary bishop in the fourth century.

Since a fair amount of the language and details of these chapters seems to be lifted from the *Life of Martin*, we might wonder whether the second account (about Benedict) really took place. There can be no doubt that Gregory, and like him

Benedict, had great devotion to St. Martin. Otherwise, he would not have dedicated his first chapel to the Gallic monk/bishop. But the simple fact that in Gregory's story Benedict never leaves his mountain after this time to preach the Gospel makes one wonder if he ever was a pastoral figure in southern Italy.

We might remember at this point that Gregory himself was a person who found himself torn between monasticism and his pastoral duties in the greater church. One wonders how a busy pope like him could find time to write these charming tales about monks, but in telling these stories Gregory often remarks how much he would prefer monastic seclusion and contemplation to the hectic life he now has. Compared to Gregory, Benedict's brief excursion into pastoral activity was not very significant.

Benedict pardons the monks who ate outside the monastery and lied about it (XII-?)

Section 8

Charism of Prophecy

3 It was also at this time when the man of God began to exercise prophetic gifts: he could predict the future and describe far-off events.

XII-1 Now it was the custom of that monastery that when the brothers went out on some errand, they did not eat or drink outside the monastery. Although this observance of the Rule was strictly observed, one day the brothers went out on an errand and were held up until a late hour. They knew a pious woman in the district, so they went to her house for a meal.

2 When they returned to the monastery late, they sought the Father's blessing according to custom. He immediately asked them: "Where did you eat?" They answered: "Nowhere." He said to them: "Why are you lying? Didn't you enter the house of such and such a woman? And didn't you eat this and that kind of food? And did you not have such and such many drinks?" When the venerable father told them about the woman's hospitality, the kind of food and the number of drinks, they admitted all that they had done. So they fell at

Benedict rebukes a devout layman who succumbed to the temptation of the evil one and broke his fast. [XIII-3]

his feet trembling and confessed their fault. He quickly forgave their fault, since he knew that they would never again act badly in his absence. For they knew he was present in spirit.

XIII-1 The brother of the monk Valentinian, whom I mentioned above, was a layman but very pious. Every year he used to come from his home to the monastery to receive a blessing from the man of God and to see his brother. And it was his custom to arrive fasting. So on a certain day he was making his way to the monastery. Another traveler joined him, carrying food for the journey. When the hour had grown late, he said: "Come, brother, let us eat! Otherwise we will tire out on the road." He answered him: "By no means will I do that! I always fast on the journey to venerable Father Benedict." When he heard this response, his companion was silent for a time.

2 When they had journeyed a ways farther, he again insisted that they eat. But he refused because he had decided to arrive fasting. The one who had urged him to eat held his peace, agreeing to proceed a little further without eating. Now the journey grew long and the fatigue of the late hour overtook the walkers. On the route they found a meadow and a spring and everything conducive to bodily refreshment. Then the companion said: "Here is water, here is a meadow, a lovely place to eat and rest a little so we might then complete our journey in good form." Since these words pleased his ears and the place pleased his eyes, the voyager was persuaded by the third offer. So he gave in and ate.

3 Then he arrived at the monastery at sundown. When he was presented to venerable Father Benedict, he asked for his blessing. But he straightway rebuked him for what he had done on the journey, saying: "What is this, brother? The evil enemy, who spoke to you through your travel companion could not persuade you the first time, nor the second time. But

the third time he did persuade you and got you to do what he wanted." Then he recognized the fault of his weak character, and he prostrated at his feet. He began to weep in shame all the more because he knew that he had done wrong before the very eyes of Benedict, even though they were far apart.

11 PETER: I can see that the spirit of Elisha was in the heart of the holy man, for (the prophet) was present to his absent disciple.

GREGORY: Peter, hold your tongue for a minute and you will hear even greater things.

XIV-1 In the days of the Goths, their king Totila heard that the holy man had the spirit of prophecy. Approaching his monastery, he stopped at a distance and announced that he was about to visit. He was immediately sent a message from the monastery bidding him to come to visit. Since he was a crafty fellow, Totila decided to test whether the man of the Lord really had the spirit of prophecy. He put his boots on one of his knights, a man named Riggo. He also had him put on the royal garments, and commanded him to go to the man of God as if he were king. He sent three of his closest companions, Vult, Ruderic, and Bildin, to accompany him. They were to walk at his side, pretending that he was king to the eyes of the servant of God. And he also sent a larger retinue so he would be thought king both from the number of his retainers and from his purple robes.

2 When this Riggo entered the monastery, dressed in finery and escorted by a large retinue, the man of God was sitting outside. When he spotted him, as soon as he could make himself heard, he shouted: "Take off what you are wearing, for it is not yours!" Riggo immediately prostrated, frightened that he had presumed to try to fool such a great man. And those who accompanied him also fell to the ground. When they rose, they did not presume to approach him, but returned to

their king. In their fright they told him how quickly they had been found out.

XV-1 Then Totila himself came to the man of God When he saw him sitting far off, he did not dare approach but prostrated on the ground. The man of God said two or three times: "Get up!" But he did not dare rise from the earth before him, so Benedict, servant of Jesus Christ, was kind enough to go himself to the prostrate king. He raised him from the ground and rebuked him for his deeds. Then in a few words he foretold all that would happen to him. "You are doing much evil, and you have done much evil. It is time to stop this bad behavior! At any rate, you will enter Rome, you will cross the sea. You will reign nine years and die on the tenth."

2 When he heard this, the king shook with terror. He begged for prayers and departed. From that time on he was less cruel. Not long afterward he did take Rome, and then crossed over to Sicily. And in the tenth year of his reign, by the judgment of God, he lost his kingdom and his life.

COMMENTARY

This unit, which comprises chapters VIII to XV of Gregory's text, has a unifying theme, which in fact runs all the way through chapter XXII. The focus is on Benedict as a prophetic wonderworker. In Gregory's usage, unlike the biblical point of view, the prophet is one who is clairvoyant. Thus Benedict can both see into the future and also see events at a distance. The Bible thinks the role of a prophet is to communicate God's will to the people, something that Benedict also accomplishes.

In our present unit, we find two episodes in which Benedict knows what has gone on during the journeys of other people. In the third member, he sees through the ruse of

King Totila and then sees into the king's future destiny. In the chapters that follow, these two different kinds of clairvoyant prophecy are used in alternating sequence, which shows that Gregory is a literary artist with a sense of form.

Since all the stories in this part of the *Dialogue* are about Benedict's clairvoyance, it appears that they have been gathered according to theme, not chronological sequence. Thus it is not possible to locate the stories precisely in Benedict's history at Monte Cassino. This does not mean that the stories are completely unhistorical, but it prevents us from reconstructing any kind of detailed biography of St. Benedict.

We know from Gregory's other writings that he was interested in the various kinds of cognitive miracles. In the beginning of his *Homilies on Ezechiel*,[9] Gregory presents an extensive classification of such wonders, including those of Benedict. We can probably say that Gregory cared a good deal more about miracles than did Benedict himself, for there is no mention of them in the Rule. But the *Dialogues* of St. Gregory are loaded with miracle stories.

So then XII and XIII are a pair of "distance miracles." Actually, we could also call them a pair of "food stories" because both of them have to do with unauthorized meals taken on a journey. In the first case, some of Benedict's monks find themselves delayed on a day trip and therefore accept a meal from a pious woman of the neighborhood. They know it is against the "custom of the house," but they think the abbot won't know the difference.

But this particular abbot knows just about everything. When Benedict confronts them with their disobedience, they make it worse by lying. Then the saint proceeds to describe their meal in detail, sending them to their knees in confusion. Benedict quickly forgives them; he is not interested in punishment since he sees they have learned their lesson. It might be noted that Benedict is presented here as milder than his own

Rule, which prescribes "excommunication" for monks who presume to eat outside the monastery on day trips (RB 51).[40]

In the second episode, which concerns the brother of one of the monks, the protagonist is a layman who is under no monastic regulation. But he apparently has a long-standing custom of not eating on his annual journey to Monte Cassino. That ascetic practice seems important enough for Satan himself to attack, so he joins the man on the road as a fellow traveler. The evil one tries his best to talk the pious man into joining him for a meal, and after three tries he succeeds. Again, Benedict knows all about it and admonishes the man when he arrives at the monastery.

The second story is probably the more satisfying of the two since it is so well developed. The long, drawn-out temptation process is quite poignant and it shows this man resisting with all his might. He does not know it is the devil who is walking beside him, but he does know that he does not want to violate his own integrity. The biblically educated reader can feel the overtones of stories from Scripture such as the temptation of Adam in Paradise and the clairvoyance of Elisha in regard to the tricks of his servant, Gehazi (2 Kgs 5:25-26).[41] And it is hard to overlook the resemblance to the walk to Emmaus of Jesus and the disciples in the Gospel of Luke (24:13-35).[42]

Besides the Bible, it seems that the *Life of Martin* is again in the background of these stories. Just as Gregory begins with a programmatic statement about miracles of prophecy (XI.3), so does Sulpicius Severus provide an exact counterpart in his text.[43] Of course, all these resemblances tend to dilute the historicity of Gregory's account, but they also add rich overtones. The ambitious reader can gain a lot by reading the parallel texts.

But the present author has to confess some ambivalence regarding these stories. Especially concerning the layman in chapter XIII. It is not clear to me why Benedict should care so much about his eating habits. Furthermore, it must have been

more than a little disconcerting to have an abbot who could see at a distance. Who can bear that kind of scrutiny? Still, it must be conceded in the other direction that Benedict does not show himself particularly harsh in either case. He wants the rules kept, but is ready to forgive when they are not.[40]

The story of King Totila is of a somewhat different type. Again, the man of God shows an uncanny ability to see through deception and also to see into the future. However, where the previous two stories concern simple folk and rather inconsequential matters, Totila was by no means a small fish. We know from separate secular historical sources that he was an extremely tough and effective leader of the Gothic armies of Italy. For him to be coming to see Benedict indicates that the latter had become a well-known holy man. Benedict's fame spread far and wide.

Even though Totila is shown in the story as a rather sly and crooked fellow, he was also the (temporary) savior of the Goths. When the Byzantine armies of Emperor Justinian invaded Italy in the 530s, they quickly overran the peninsula. After they took the Gothic capital of Ravenna in 540, all appeared lost for the Goths. But King Totila rallied the troops and retook most of Italy before he was killed in 552. So at least at this point, Gregory's florid spiritual tales make contact with the hard reality of secular history.

Why does Gregory seem to enjoy this story so much? Probably because he had a low opinion of the Goths. After all, they were Arians and not orthodox Christians. In fact, Gregory was writing fifty years later, and he had his own troubles with an even more barbarous group of invaders, the Lombards. These people eventually destroyed Monte Cassino itself. So for Gregory to show Benedict cowing Totila and his henchmen would be the kind of story that Italians would greatly relish.[41]

Still, we do well to recall that Gregory also reports the story of the pious Goth who loses the sickle blade in the lake

of Subiaco. So we cannot say that he is motivated by purely Roman aristocratic disdain and hatred for the Germanic tribes. There is no question that Gregory always wants to show Benedict as a masterful figure who feared no man. In that sense, he was like Gregory himself: both of them were Roman aristocrats who knew how to deal with important people. But they also saw Christ in them.[44]

At any rate, the story of Totila is a good reminder to us of the actual social situation in which Benedict and Gregory lived. In short, they lived in a time of protracted war and pillage. So much so that it is a miracle that books like the Rule of Benedict and the *Dialogues* of Gregory were even written, much less survived to our own day. To get a feeling for that situation, imagine such books being written today in Baghdad or Darfur, Sudan.

A sene scrutatur: præsul venturus an urbem
Totila Romuleam diruet ense ferus.
Audit ab illustri patre Romam non trucis Regis.
Vastandam gladio, at fulgure, peste, fame.

Benedict tells the Bishop of Canosa, who regularly visited the saint, that the Goths will not destroy Rome. XV 3

Section 9

Further Prophecies

3 Now the bishop of Canosa used to visit the servant of God, and the man of God loved him very much for the merit of his life. When they were discussing King Totila's invasion and destruction of Rome, the bishop said: "That city will be so devastated by this king that it will no longer be inhabited." The man of God answered him: "Rome will not be destroyed by the tribes, but it will collapse on itself, worn down by storms, lightning, whirlwinds and earthquakes." The mystery of this prophecy has already become clearer to us than light, for we see the walls of this city crumbled, houses destroyed and churches destroyed by a tornado. And we see its buildings, weakened by old age, cluttering the ground with their ever-increasing ruins.

4 Although his disciple Honoratus told me this prediction, he said he had not heard it from Benedict's own mouth. He said he heard it from the brothers.

XVI-1 At the same time, a certain cleric of the church of Aquino was tormented by a demon. He was sent by the holy man, Constantius, bishop of

his church, to seek healing at many shrines of the martyrs. But the martyrs of God did not wish to give him healing so they might show how much grace there was in Benedict. Thus he was brought to the servant of almighty God, Benedict. Pouring out prayers to Jesus Christ the Lord, he quickly drove the ancient enemy from the possessed man. He then ordered the healed man: "Go, and never again eat meat. And you must never presume to receive sacred orders. The day you dare to take sacred orders, you will again be enslaved by the devil."

2 So the healed cleric departed. And as a recent punishment tends to frighten people, so he observed all that the man of God had commanded. Now after many years his elders had departed this life, and he saw that his juniors were promoted to sacred orders ahead of him. So he ignored the words of the man of God as if he had forgotten them after a long time, and he came forward for sacred orders. Right away the devil who had left him seized him. He did not cease to torment him until he died.

3 PETER: I can see that that man also knew the very secrets of God. For he could see that the man was given over to the devil precisely so he would not dare to take holy orders.

GREGORY: How could he not know divine secrets since he kept God's commands? For it stands written: ". . . he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Cor 6:17).

4 PETER: If the person who clings to the Lord becomes one spirit with him, why does the same great preacher say: ". . . who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (Rom 11:34). It seems rather strange that someone would not know the mind of another with whom he was united.

5 GREGORY: Insofar as they are united with him, the saints do know the mind of the Lord. For the same apostle also says: "For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one

comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:11). Then, to show he knew the things of God, he added: "But we have not received the spirit of this world but the spirit that is from God." Again, he explains: "'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,' God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:9-10).

6 PETER: But if the things of God were revealed to the apostle, why did he precede the statement I quoted as follows: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33). And while I'm at it, another question occurs to me as well. For David the prophet says to the Lord: "With my lips I declare all the ordinances of thy mouth" (Ps 119:13). And since it is less to know than to speak, why does Paul claim the judgments of God are unknowable when David says that he not only knows everything but even has pronounced it on his lips?

7 GREGORY: I have responded briefly to you on both points above when I said that holy people, insofar as they are in the Lord, are not ignorant of the mind of the Lord. For all those who follow the Lord devoutly are with God in their devotion; but those who are still weighed down with fleshly corruption are not with the Lord. They know the hidden things of the Lord inasmuch as they are joined to him; but when they are separated from him, they don't know them. Because they still have not penetrated his secrets perfectly, they call his judgments incomprehensible. But because they are joined to him in spirit, and since they accept what they find in Holy Scripture and private revelation, they recognize, know and utter these things. What God does not teach, they do not know; what God teaches, they know.

8 That is why, when David the prophet had said: "With my lips I declared all the ordinances," he immediately

added: "of your mouth." As if he were to say: "I was able to know and pronounce those judgments that I knew you had uttered. For those things that you yourself do not pronounce, you obviously keep hidden from our thoughts." Therefore the statements of the prophet and apostle are in agreement, for the judgments of God are unknowable; yet those things uttered by his mouth are pronounced by human lips. For the things pronounced by God can be known by humans, but not those that are hidden.

9 PETER: In objection to my question, your reasoning makes things clear. If there is still something to add concerning the power of this man, by all means tell me.

XVII-1 GREGORY: A certain nobleman named Theopropus was converted by the preaching of Father Benedict, who confided in him because of the merit of his life. One day when this man entered his cell, he found him weeping bitterly. He waited a long time, but he saw that the tears did not cease. These were not the tears that habitually accompanied his prayer, but tears of sorrow. So he asked what could be the cause of such great grief. The man of God answered him: "This whole monastery that I have built, and all that I have prepared for the brothers, has been given over to the barbarians by the judgment of almighty God. I have only obtained with great difficulty that the monks themselves will be spared."

2 The prophecy that Theopropus heard we have seen realized in the recent destruction of his monastery by the Lombards. One night, as the brothers slept, the Lombards entered the building. They destroyed everything, but they could not harm a single person. For God carried out what he promised his faithful servant Benedict: if he conceded the goods to the barbarians, he could protect his people. In this affair I think Benedict was like Paul. His ship crew had to throw

Benedict prophesies to Theoprobus, a nobleman who has embraced the monastic life, the destruction of the abbey by the Lombards. [XVII·?]

everything overboard, but in consolation he received the life of every one of his companions.

XVIII–1 At one time our Exhilaratus, whom you have known since his conversion, was sent by his master to transport two wooden casks of wine (commonly known as flagons) to the man of God in his monastery. He delivered one but hid the other en route. The man of God, from whom actions done at a distance could not be hidden, received the one cask with thanks. But he said to the boy at his departure: "My son, be careful not to drink from the cask you have hidden. Tip it carefully, and you will see what it contains." He departed from the man of God in great embarrassment, but he returned because he wanted to test what he had heard. When he tipped the cask, a serpent immediately crawled out. Then young Exhilaratus was afraid of what he had done, because of what he found in the wine.

XIX–1 Not far from the monastery was a village where many people had been converted from idol worship to faith in God by the preaching of Benedict. There were some nuns living there, and the servant of God often used to send the brothers to them for spiritual conferences. One day he sent one as usual, but after his conference, the monk he had sent was offered some napkins by the nuns. He accepted them and put them in his pocket.

2 As soon as he returned home, the man of God began to scold him in a most bitter fashion: "Why has evil entered your heart!" He was shocked, and could not understand why he was being upbraided, for he had forgotten what he had done. He said to him: "Was I not present when you accepted napkins from the handmaids of God? And when you hid them in your cloak?" He immediately prostrated at his feet and accused himself of acting stupidly. And he flung away the napkins from his person.

COMMENTARY

This rather long section of *Dialogue II* consists of five miracles of prophecy, interrupted by a protracted discussion between Gregory and Peter concerning the reason why holy people are sometimes given access to the secrets of God. As with the previous section ("The Charism of Prophecy"), these prophecies are divided between things seen at a distance by Benedict and things seen by him in the future.

Although this material may give the appearance of a loosely strung together series of miracle stories, it appears that Gregory has arranged them rather artistically in a pattern of ABB'A'.[97] Actually, this pattern is rather vast, covering both sections 8 and 9. The pairings are as follows: Chapters XII–XIII and XVII–XVIII are about things seen at a distance by the saint. Sections 14–15 and 16–17 are about things seen in the future by the prophetic seer Benedict. Granted, it is not necessary to be aware of this pattern to enjoy the stories and profit from them, but it does help to know that Gregory was a very careful literary craftsman. His *Dialogues* may be aimed at a popular audience, but they were not hastily thrown together.

Concerning the prophecy about Totila and Rome, we might simply note that it is central to the whole literary structure of XII–XVIII. That indicates that it was of supreme importance for Pope Gregory, and probably for Benedict as well. We should always remember that Gregory wrote the *Dialogues* in Rome, and so he had a great stake in this question. From what he says here and in his other writings, Gregory had an acute sense that Rome was in a state of rampant decay. Anyone who visits Rome even today comes away with a sense of what the place must have looked like in its glory. But those days were long gone by the time of Gregory (ca. AD 600).

It might also be added that the physical decline had only *started* by Gregory's time. Within a few hundred years, the

city was virtually deserted, its vast walled expanse inhabited mostly by cows and goats. What had once been a vibrant metropolis of at least a million people shrunk to less than twenty-five thousand by the year 1000. Mention of the millennium brings to mind the fact that Gregory was convinced that the world would end in the year 600. And his apocalyptic mentality was largely shaped by the crumbling city in which he lived. Another factor contributing to his pessimism was the constant pressure of the Lombard who battered the city walls all during his pontificate.

To look back at Benedict's prophecy itself, we should note that it actually is uttered in friendly contradiction to an even more dire prophecy expressed by the bishop of Canosa. This bishop, whose name was Sabinus, was in fact a rather distinguished figure who had served as a papal ambassador and who was also gifted with charism of prophecy.[64] Apparently, Gregory wants to make the point that the prophet-monk Benedict was in fact a greater seer than the prophet-bishop Sabinus.

We should repeat here what we have said before, and probably will say again: the gift of clairvoyance was not of very great interest to the prophetic tradition of the Jewish Bible. Still, it is not accurate either to say it was totally absent. And there is no doubt whatever that it was of intense interest to Gregory. In fact, in one of his voluminous homilies on Ezekiel, he points out that Ezekiel had foreseen the destruction of Samaria, and Nahum saw the future of Nineveh to be catastrophic. Not only that: Gregory applies this clairvoyance precisely to the fate of Rome.[65]

Another bishop who cannot match Benedict appears in the next story (XVI).[66] Constantius, bishop of nearby Aquino, cannot heal his own cleric, who is possessed by a demon. And neither can the bones of the martyrs, to whom he sends the poor man. Benedict, however, immediately sends the devil packing, but with a warning: If the man ever eats meat or takes

holy orders, he will immediately fall back under Satan's sway. Unlike most of the miracles in *Dialogue II*, this one does not end well. The man foolishly lets himself be ordained and Satan resumes control—until his death. Although Benedict rarely exercises this kind of terrible punishment, this man brought it on himself.

After the sad story of the Aquino cleric, we come to a couple pages of conversation between Peter and Gregory. If the reader is like me, she probably finds this dialogue somewhat repetitious and unsatisfying. The point is clear enough: one must be close to God to know the mind of God. But Peter, who often comes across as a bit obtuse, continues to adduce biblical texts that indicate that the saints themselves did *not* understand the mind of God. As always, Gregory is ready with the answer: sometimes the saints were closer and sometimes further from God. But the key point is that God only reveals what he wishes to whom he wishes. There is no picking the divine pocket, as it were, for clairvoyant information.

The third story in the set also concerns the future of Italy. Now the subject is Monte Cassino, not Rome. But in this case, what the saint sees shocks him to his depths. His friend Theopropus finds him sobbing in his room, and he does not stop when he is discovered. When he finally calms down enough to recount what he has seen, he blurts out that his beloved Monte Cassino will be sacked by the Lombards. In other words, everything he has built up with such great effort will be overturned by these uncouth ruffians. In this case, the man of God makes no pretense of being free from the sway of his passions. He gives himself fully to grief.[4]

Still, Benedict adds that he was able to save something from the calamitous prophecy. For God has agreed to spare the monks even when the buildings will be pulled down. At this point, one gets the impression that Benedict was permitted to bargain with God, something like Abraham in Genesis 18. That

is a touching thought, but it does tend to leave the impression that God is an angry, vengeful tyrant who must be taught a bit of mercy by one of his creatures. The story also has another biblical analogue in the shipwreck of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles (27:22-24).[73] Here again Paul is told to sacrifice the goods for the persons on board. In contrast, Paul shows no signs of bitter chagrin at this loss. Of course, he did not own the goods!

At the end of the unit, we find two more "distance" miracles. As we noted earlier, chapters XVIII and XIX are meant to function as bookends with XII and XIII. What do we see when we actually compare these two sets? Exhilaratus certainly is not a very admirable character. Although Gregory says he has become a "convert," at that time, he was a typical crafty, and sometimes crooked, servant. His theft of a cask of wine brought him the visit of a snake, but Benedict forewarned him so it was not a disaster. Compared to him, the brother of the monk in XIII is a higher type altogether. He fell after Satan's continual bombardment of temptation, but he did not break any commandment, nor did he violate any monastic principle. How could he? He was not a monk.

The final case (XIX) is a bit more complex and therefore interesting. As with XVIII, the sin here is dishonesty, whereas in both XII and XIII it is gluttony.[74] Now the issue is not food and drink but a couple of napkins that some nuns gave to a brother as a gift for his preaching. He unthinkingly stuffs them into his coat and walks home.[75] Then much to his (and our) surprise, Benedict rips into him for his dishonesty: "Why has evil entered into your heart?" Given the paltry nature of the "theft" and the disproportionate vehemence of Benedict's correction, the modern reader is left a bit bemused.

It might be helpful, however, to consider some collateral information. For one thing the Rule of Benedict itself is quite rigid in the matter of giving and receiving gifts. Not only is the

monk not to accept gifts without informing the abbot: he must also hand over the gift for the abbot's eventual disposal. And, says Benedict, the abbot may decide to give it to somebody else! (RB 54). In modern times, monks routinely give and receive small gifts without much ado. But they also exhibit, on occasion, a shocking unawareness of the vow of dispossession under which they live.

There is also a biblical story that should be taken into account to appreciate the full flavor of this passage. In 2 Kings, the prophet Elisha heals the powerful general Naaman the Syrian of leprosy. Elisha refuses to take any payment for this prodigious miracle. But his servant, Gehazi, is more pragmatic. He goes to Naaman and basically extorts a large payment out of him. When Elisha finds out what he has done, he delivers a withering blast that ends with condign punishment: Gehazi is afflicted with leprosy!

Benedict certainly never is shown to be quite that vindictive, but his dressing down of the monk with the napkins is told in much the same fashion. In fact, the dialogue is so close that it must have been lifted intact from the biblical passage.[15] Like Benedict, Elisha tells him that he was standing there watching him extort the two talents of silver from the Syrian. Of course, the monk and his napkins present a much less serious offence, and Gregory makes sure that Benedict does not carry through with a severe punishment.[16] Certainly it is important to keep in mind that the main purpose of this story, and the other ones in this set, is not to show Benedict as a strict disciplinarian, but as a prophetic figure. As I suggested in the previous unit, the practical implication of having an abbot who sees right through the hearts of his subjects does not seem to trouble Gregory. If Benedict had not been a towering saint, his clairvoyance would have been unbearable! But of course, Gregory makes that clear enough in his answers to Peter.

Stat puer accensa face, murmurat ante Magistrum.
Mente alta, ipse humili corde reprendit eum.
Quis sum ego? quis uero hic cui seruio? corde uolutat,
Tu puer elatus, Sanctus hic, atq; humilis.

Benedict reprimands a young monk who, since he is the son of a high ranking official, questions why he should be serving Benedict by holding his torch. [XX I]

Section 10

Last Prophecies

XX-1 One day when the venerable father was taking his evening meal, one of his monks, the son of a knight, was holding the lamp by his table. As the man of God was eating, while he stood there as lamp bearer, he began to be moved by the spirit of pride to brood on the matter. So he said to himself: "Who is this, whom I serve while he eats? Here I am holding the lamp like a slave." The man of God immediately turned to him and began to rebuke him, saying: "Sign your heart, brother! What are you saying? Sign your heart!" And he quickly called the brothers and told them to take the lamp from him. He told him to leave his post and to go sit quietly alone.

2 When asked by the brothers what he had in his heart, he duly reported how he was puffed up by a spirit of pride. And he told them the words he had spoken silently in his mind against the man of God. Then it was crystal clear to all that nothing could be hidden from venerable Benedict, for even the words of one's thoughts were audible to him.

XXI-1 At another time a famine gripped that same region of Campania, and everyone was

afflicted by the scarcity of food. Grain was already in short supply in Benedict's monastery, and almost all the loaves had been consumed. So at meal time, the brothers could only find five of them. When the venerable father saw their sadness, he tried to correct their faintheartedness a bit. And he also cheered them with a promise: "Why are you downcast over lack of bread? Today it is lacking, but tomorrow you will have all you want."

2 So on the following day two hundred bushels of grain in sacks were found at the gate of the monastery. Almighty God sent it through intermediaries, but we still don't know who they were. When the brothers saw this, they gave thanks to God. They learned from this to trust God in both abundance and need.

3 PETER: Now tell me, I beg you, should we believe that the spirit of prophecy was always with this servant of God, or did that spirit only fill his mind at intervals?

GREGORY: Peter, the spirit of prophecy does not always enlighten the spirit of the prophets, for as it written of the Holy Spirit: "The wind blows where it wills" (John 3:8), so we should realize that the spirit inspires when she wills. So when the king asked Nathan if he might construct a temple, first he agreed and then he said no. That is why Elisha, when he saw a woman weeping but did not know why, said to his servant, who wished to dismiss her: "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress and the LORD has hidden it from me, and has not told me" (2 Kgs 4:27).

4 Almighty God acts with great kindness, for sometimes he bestows the spirit of prophecy and sometimes he withholds it. Thus he raises the spirits to heaven and then keeps them humble so that they might find what is in God when they receive the spirit, but when they do not have the spirit, they find out what is in themselves.

5 PETER: There is every reason to agree with what you say. But now, I ask you, please add whatever comes to your mind concerning venerable father Benedict.

XXII-1 GREGORY: At another time he was asked by a certain pious man to send his disciples to build a monastery on his land near the town of Terracina. He agreed to this request by sending a group of brothers, one of whom he made abbot, and another he made prior for them. As they were leaving, said to them: "Go, and on such and such a day I will come and show you where you should build the chapel, the brothers' dining room, the reception hall for guests, and other necessities. When they had received the blessing, they traveled there and eagerly awaited the set day. They prepared everything they thought necessary for those who might visit with such a great father.

2 Now on the night before the promised day, the man of the lord appeared in a dream to the servant of God he had made father abbot and to his prior. He carefully pointed out what should be built where. When they both woke from sleep, they shared what they had seen in their dreams. They did not entirely trust the vision, and they still expected the man of God to come as he had promised.

3 When the man of God did not show up on the date set, they returned to him and sadly said: "Father, we waited for you to come as you promised. You were to show us where to build things. But you did not come!" He said to them: "Brothers, what are you talking about? Did I not come as I promised?" They said: "When did you come?" He answered: "Did I not appear to both of you in a vision and point out each site to you? Now go, and build each monastic unit as you learned in the dream." When they heard that, they were amazed. And so they returned to the property we mentioned and constructed everything according to the revelation they had received.

4 PETER: I would like to know how it could happen that Benedict could have given an answer to those sleeping far away. They could hear in a vision and understand what they heard.

GREGORY: Why do you doubt, Peter, and look for an explanation of the deed? It is clear enough that the spirit is of a more mobile nature than the body. We know from the certain witness of Scripture that the prophet Habakkuk was raised up from Judea and was set down immediately with his dinner in Chaldea. He fed the prophet Daniel with the food and then found himself suddenly back in Judea. So if Habakkuk was able to travel so far in an instant—and carry dinner!—why is it surprising what Father Benedict obtained: how he traveled by spirit to tell the necessary information to the sleeping brothers. So just as Habakkuk traveled physically to carry physical food, so the abbot traveled in a spiritual manner to build up the spiritual life.

5 PETER: The hand of your teaching has rubbed clean the doubt from my mind, as it were.

COMMENTARY

The next three prophecies can be considered the final members of a set that began with chapter XII.[7] Not all these prophecies are exactly predictions, but all of them have to do with Benedict's ability to read the human heart and sometimes see events at a distance. Since all of the episodes deal with human vices, it is possible to notice a progression that in fact matches the famous list of eight capital sins as found in the writings of John Cassian.[8] Thus we find gluttony dealt with in chapters XII–XIII, avarice in XVIII–XIX, sadness in XXI–XXIII, and pride in chapter XX. As with the earlier writers, Gregory deals first with the lower passions and then with the higher.

The first episode in this set (XX), presents us with a domestic scene in the monastic refectory. Although RB 41.8 tells the monks not to eat after sundown, in this case they are doing just that. Perhaps it was an unusual circumstance because one of

them needs to hold a lamp while the abbot has his meal. Like Maur and Placid, he is the son of nobility and that background causes him some resentment. He gets to thinking that he is being asked to play the role of a slave. Benedict reads his heart and immediately relieves him of his post.

The reading of the heart, known by the ancients as *cardiognosis*, is not something that has much of a biblical foundation. Although there are a few cases in the Jewish Bible, and certainly Jesus could read hearts,[9] one of the most fully developed tales of *cardiognosis* occurs in the *History of the Monks of Egypt*.[10] In that case, a monk comes to John of Lycopolis for spiritual counsel but he is asked to wait while John deals with a public official. This triggers silent resentment in the monk, which John proceeds to correct although not so harshly as Benedict's "vehement rebuke."

Although the performance of the young monk in this episode is not edifying, at least it ends well. After the youth has been sternly corrected, he does not harbor resentment but freely confesses to the brothers what he had been thinking. In other words, he implicitly admits he deserved it. The whole sequence reflects an important theme from early monasticism, namely, that harmful thoughts should not be entertained but brought out into the light of day where they can be healed (RB 7.44–48). Ideally they should be confessed to a discreet spiritual director who is skilled at *cardiognosis*.

Still, we might notice that the lesson here is not quite the same as in RB. There the monk is urged to share his inner life with the abbot or the elder. Here the emphasis is on Benedict's remarkable clairvoyance. Now the whole community becomes fully aware that the abbot saw into every heart. This knowledge seems to impress Gregory more than it might impress some modern monks (like the author!). Who could bear to live in such an atmosphere? If it was indeed true of Benedict, we have to assume that he used such a gift very, very carefully.

The next story (XXI) does not seem to bear such a heavy psychological weight. Famine grips the region of Monte Cassino (Campania) and the monks are as hungry as everyone else. They are fretting and perhaps whining, so Benedict consoles them with the news that they will have all they want to eat—tomorrow. Sure enough, someone leaves two hundred sacks of grain at the gate of the monastery. End of problem. Actually, the same famine comes up again in chapter XXVIII, where it is a question of lack of oil. We know that there was indeed a severe famine in Campania in AD 537. This is one of the few plausible historical anchors for the *Dialogues* of Gregory.[4]

After this episode, Gregory breaks into the narrative with another dialogue/meditation. Now the subject is limitation. Peter's question is a good one (for a change): are the saints *always* enlightened? Simply reading along in miracle after miracle, we might get the impression that people like Benedict always exist in a state of light and intuition. Perhaps Peter is beginning to wonder if this is really possible. Gregory assures him that it is not! The saints are like the rest of us in that sometimes they have no special insight and therefore cannot read hearts. Moreover, this is not just because they are sinners who suffer the effects of original sin.

Rather, God sometimes deliberately withholds the prophetic gift from them for their own good. Gregory is able to bring in another text concerning the prophet Elisha, who is one of his favorite models (2 Kgs 4:27). Even Elisha had his moments of darkness, and to his credit he knew it and admitted it. But Gregory is able to derive a further, subtler moral from the limitation of the prophets and saints. He says that when they do not have the spirit, they find out what is in themselves. And that in turn helps them to better appreciate the gift of God when they *do* have the spirit. It is not they themselves who prophesy; it is God.

The third story of the set (XXII) is a much more elaborately developed account of another clairvoyant episode. Or rather, it is yet another example of Benedict's prophetic ability to know and influence events at a distance. In this case, the saint decides to establish a daughterhouse at Terracina. He was encouraged to do so by a man who donated land on the sea coast of Campania for such a purpose. Benedict did what abbots have done down through the ages: he sent a contingent of brothers to be the founders of a fledgling community.

In addition to sending a group, he also appointed the superiors, both abbot and prior. Now one hesitates to pick nits, but it can hardly escape a careful reader of RB 65 that this flies directly in the face of that rather turbulent chapter.[62] In RB 65, Benedict insists that priors are not to be appointed by the same persons who appoint abbots. Rather, since the prior is strictly subordinate to the abbot, he must be appointed by that very abbot. But here Gregory blithely portrays Benedict violating his own Rule. It might be added that *Gregory* violated the Rule by appointing (as pope) both abbot and prior in certain monasteries. The question that lingers is simply this: Did Gregory actually *know* Benedict's Rule?[63]

At any rate, this story again revolves around Benedict's remarkable ability to travel in spirit to distant places. In this episode he tells the founding monks he will visit them soon to lay out the foundations of the buildings. He comes to the abbot and the prior in a dream that delivers the needed information, but he does not visit in the flesh. Because they are expecting the latter sort of visit, they disregard the dream and complain to the man of God that he has not come to them. He patiently explains that he has indeed come, but not in the body.

It is surely significant that a parallel story occurs in the same *History of the Monks of Egypt* that we cited above.[64] Again the protagonist is John of Lycopolis, a great Coptic saint whose behavior in this case is at least puzzling. When he is begged

by a husband to submit to an interview with his very ill wife, the saint categorically refuses. He has made a vow not to speak to women, and nothing can persuade him to break it. But that is not the end of the tale. Instead, John visits the woman in a dream and arranges for her healing. So we can easily forgive the prophetic saint his rigorism.

With Benedict, however, we might be a little less indulgent.[45] His dream travel is hardly a necessity. Unlike John of Lycopolis, he is not dealing with a desperate case. What would prevent him from journeying the twenty or so miles to the coast and to Terracina? Nevertheless, it is quite possible that Gregory is in fact presenting Benedict as greater than John. While John appeared to one woman, Benedict appeared to two men and simultaneously. We may not be much impressed with this kind of one-upmanship, but we are not medieval hagiographers.[46] There is no doubt at all that Gregory's audience would certainly appreciate such a pious game.

It is perhaps worth pausing at this point to notice Benedict's, or probably Gregory's, great interest in buildings. We saw that he had the saint taking great interest in the first buildings of Subiaco and also at Monte Cassino. Now the same fascination is shown toward the buildings at Terracina. In one sense this is somewhat disappointing, for the history of monasticism shows that sometimes far too much importance is placed on impressive buildings. And we know that the Lombards would soon knock down all Benedict's buildings.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the proper construction of buildings is indeed of great importance in the founding of monasteries. At the very least, the buildings must serve the primary goal of providing a suitable context for the contemplative life. If the layout of the monastery is ill conceived, the community will be forced to cope with a physical impediment to their spiritual well being. The history of monasticism shows that monastic architects have often been

quite capable, even groundbreaking, in their creations. But monastic history is also strewn with examples of monumental incompetence by founders in this regard.

Nevertheless, this section does not end with talk of buildings but rather emphasis on the Holy Spirit. When Peter expresses some doubt as to the possibility of Benedict's dream travel, Gregory gently rebukes him with the example of the prophet Habakkuk, who flew from Judea to Chaldea—carrying lunch for the prophet Daniel. If God could bring off such a carnal miracle, then why could he not do something much more spiritual as in the case of Benedict's dream journey?

Although the casual reader will probably not be aware of it, this particular discussion between Peter and Gregory is quite important in the overall scheme of things. That it occurs at the end of the large section beginning at chapter IX should tip us off to its significance.[37] The fact that Gregory here invokes the spirit ("so the holy abbot went spiritually to inaugurate a spiritual life") should be taken very seriously, for this is also what Gregory does at the end of the other two main sections of *Dialogue II* (*Dial.* II.8 and *Dial.* II.38). He does this to make sure the reader is not led astray by this plethora of miracles. *The spiritual life is more important than physical miracles.*

Egrediuntur ab æde sacra surgendo puella
E tumulo, Christi pane morantur ibi
Nil magis infrænat linguam, ac maledicta coercet,
Quam Christi panis, quam cruor eius olim.

After Benedict has deprived two nuns of communion with the Church because they refuse to control their tongues, he lifts his ban after the nuns' death in response to the request of the nuns' grief-stricken nurse. [XXIII-2]

Section II

The First Three Miracles of Power

PETER: But I would like to know about the power of this man in his ordinary way of speaking.

XXIII-1 GREGORY: Even his common speech, Peter, was not devoid of spiritual weight. Because when a person's heart is focused on heavenly matters, his words never tumble uselessly from his mouth. If he said anything threatening but without considering it, his word had so much power that it was as if he had uttered a verdict and not spoken tentatively.

2 Not far from his monastery there lived two nuns. They were of noble birth and had their own house. A certain pious man served their external needs. But nobility of birth can lead some people to coarseness of spirit. Then they think they are better than others because they do not have a humble view of themselves. Now these two nuns did not restrain their tongues in a manner befitting their religious garb. So they often angered with their careless talk the holy man who cared for their physical needs.

3 He bore this treatment for a long time. He then went to the man of God and told him all the verbal insults he had

received. When the man of God heard this about them, he immediately sent them this order: "Correct your speech, because if you do not, I excommunicate you!" Actually, he did not declare them excommunicate, he just threatened to do so.

4 They, however, made no change in their behavior, and in a few days they died and were buried in the church. Whenever a solemn Mass was celebrated in that church, the deacon made the customary announcement: "Those who do not communicate must now leave." Then their maidservant, who used to carry their oblations to the Lord, saw the nuns leave their grave and exit the church. When she noticed that they often left at the command of the deacon, and could not remain in church, she remembered the order the man of God had sent them when they were still alive. They would be excommunicated unless they changed their behavior and speech.

5 So she informed the servant of God of this with great sorrow. He immediately gave her an oblation with his own hand, saying: "Go and make this offering to the Lord for them: then they will no longer be excommunicated." So the oblation was made for them and the deacon as always told the noncommunicants to leave the church. But they were no longer seen to leave the church. So it is clear without a doubt that since they did not leave with the excommunicated, they received Communion from the Lord through the servant of God.

6 PETER: I am amazed that even a venerable and most holy man, while still existing in this corruptible flesh, was able to free souls already standing at the invisible judgment.

GREGORY: Peter, was he still not on earth who heard these words: ". . . whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt 16:19)? Those now take his place in binding and loosing who hold the place of holy government by their faith and morals. But so that the man of earth might have so much power, the Creator of heaven and earth came to earth from

heaven. And that flesh might be able to judge spiritual matters, God deigned to become human for our sake. Thus our feebleness was able to rise above itself because the strength of God was weakened beneath itself.

7 PETER: The explanation you give seems well fitted to the power of the signs.

XXIV-1 GREGORY: One day one of his young monks, who loved his family to excess and wished to go to their house, left the monastery without permission. As soon as he arrived there, he fell dead. When he was buried, the next day his body was found thrown out of the grave. They carefully buried him again, but the next day again they found him dug up as before.

2 They then hurried to the dwelling of Father Benedict, whom they tearfully begged to graciously send him his blessing. The man of God immediately gave them Communion with his own hands, saying: "Go and place the Body of the Lord on his breast, and then bury him." When they had done that, the ground held him and no longer rejected him. Peter, you can understand what merit the man of God had with the Lord Jesus Christ. For even the earth rejected the body of him who lacked Benedict's blessing.

PETER: I fully grasp this and I am stunned.

XXV-1 GREGORY: A certain monk of Benedict's community was obsessed with roaming and did not want to remain in the monastery. Although the man of God corrected him severely and warned him often, he absolutely refused to remain in the community. And he incessantly demanded to be released. Finally, one day the venerable father grew tired of his brashness and angrily ordered him to get out.

2 As soon as he left the monastery, he found himself face to face with a roaring dragon on the road. When the dragon

that had appeared wished to devour him, he began to quiver with terror and cry: "Hurry, hurry, this awful dragon means to devour me!" When the brothers ran out there, however, they saw no dragon—just a badly shaken monk whom they brought back to the monastery. He straightway promised he would never leave the monastery again, and from that time on he kept his promise. Thanks to the prayers of the holy man, he had seen the dragon threatening him, the same one he previously followed without seeing.

COMMENTARY

Like the previous unit, this one also contains three miracle stories. But as we noted in the previous commentary, section 10 involves prophetic miracles while this one contains "miracles of power."[89] We have also seen that Gregory does not just string stories together but knows how to give them an artistic connection. Often the casual reader is not explicitly aware of these connections, but their effect is to create in the same reader a feeling of stability and satisfaction.[90]

And so although this unit actually begins the last major section of *Dialogue II*, Gregory ties it in with what came before. Just as the stories in the previous unit all involved a prophetic word of Benedict spoken to situations at a distance, the same thing can be said of at least the first two of these new stories, namely, the Two Nuns and the Young Monk "on furlough." But there is also some inner cohesion among these three new stories. For example, the first two just mentioned both concern the use of the Holy Eucharist as an instrument of healing and reconciliation. And then the second and the third story, namely, the Monk and the Dragon, concern unauthorized departures from the monastery.

These three stories also include a couple more common elements. In all three cases we can see, if we are looking for

it, a consistent pattern of exit, return, and permanence. This refers to the grave in stories one and two, but the monastery itself in story three. Such a structure gives the stories a feeling of sameness, which can be tiring at times, but it also looks as if the author, that is, Gregory, has gathered stories of a certain type together. In this regard, we can also point out that all three of these stories deal with eschatology, that is, the afterlife. In this they definitely point ahead to *Dialogue IV*, which most people have never read and of which we will have more to say.

The story of the Two Nuns actually has a lot of features that we have seen earlier in *Dialogue II*. For example, these two women are nobles like the young lamp bearer in *Dial. II* XX, and like him they are haughty. His pride remains in his thoughts, but theirs finds expression in their words. Benedict rebukes him in person, but the sharp-tongued nuns are reported to him at a distance. So he deals with them through the means of a stern message: "Correct your speech, because if you do not, I excommunicate you!"

The reader might be given pause by this rebuke, which looks very much like the threat of an ecclesiastical official. Apparently Benedict has some kind of jurisdiction over these women, but even when we have said that,[9] we might wonder at his power to bar them from the Eucharist. After all, monastic "excommunication," at least as seen in RB 23–30, does not involve the sacraments. In the conversation that follows the story, Peter also expresses amazement that Benedict was given power over the sacraments—and even in the next world. Gregory patiently answers that although St. Peter and his successors are empowered to bind and loose sins, there are also those "who hold the place of holy government by their faith and morals."

While it may not strike the average reader that way, this is indeed a radical statement. For it seems to blur the distinction

between ecclesiastical and charismatic power, a distinction that the Catholic Church has jealously maintained for a very long time. But here we have the head of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, that is, the pope himself, arguing for a share in sacramental power by all holy persons. As Francis Clark once pointed out, this is the kind of thing that makes historians wonder whether the *Dialogues* really *were* written by Pope Gregory at all.[91]

But we also know that things were not always quite so cut-and-dried in the early church. For example, at the beginnings of private, oracular, confession, it seems that it was not unusual for nonordained spiritual directors to confer absolution for sins. It is even better established that the Holy Eucharist was committed to lay people for uses that are no longer sanctioned today. Thus people were allowed, even encouraged,[92] to take the Eucharist home for daily consumption.

But Benedict's use of the Eucharist in the second story is another matter. He sends the sacrament by messenger to be laid on the corpse of the wayward monk. Apparently Pope Gregory approved such a usage of the Sacred Host, which effects its desired result in the story. We also know that the medieval church had to legislate against misuse of the reserved sacrament. For example, people sometimes placed the Eucharist Host in the mouth of corpses, presumably to help them through the feared Last Judgment.[93]

While we are pondering Benedict's power over the Eucharist, we should also note several other remarkable elements in the story of the Two Nuns. For example, shortly after receiving Benedict's rebuke, they both drop dead. Perhaps this did not happen in such quick order in reality, but the way Gregory tells it certainly makes it look like God was as fed up with the two harpies as was Benedict. Next, the behavior of the two dead nuns at the Eucharist makes it look as if Benedict's sentence carries over to the next world. For they obediently depart at the deacon's admonition just before Communion.[94]

When Peter expresses surprise that a human being would have that kind of power in heaven, Gregory cites Matthew 16:19: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Although this gospel text is usually interpreted to mean that God seconds whatever is done by his ministers on earth, Gregory claims that it also means that such earthly decisions perdure beyond the grave. Not only that: Benedict is able to reverse punishment in the afterlife—probably the most extreme claim for his spiritual power made by the author of the *Dialogues*.[35]

Another extraordinary detail in the story of the Two Nuns involves the vision of suffering pair by their *nutrix* or handmaid. She was accustomed to carrying their oblations to Mass, but after their death she is horrified by the sight of them departing the grave at Communion time. Since there are so many miraculous elements in this story, the reader may get swept along and not realize that here we have an ordinary person endowed with clairvoyance. It could well seem that the boundaries between this world and the next world have been considerably weakened in this story. And in that regard, these stories are a kind of preview of *Dialogue IV*, which consists almost entirely of such tales from the grave.[36]

Rather than allow ourselves to be overly distracted by the bizarre elements on the story of the Two Nuns, we should probably accept Gregory's own exegesis of the story. He tells Peter that it simply illustrates the effects of the incarnation of Christ. "Thus our feebleness was able to rise above itself because the strength of God was weakened beneath itself." If we use this Christ-optic to read the *Dialogues*, we will be on the right track. They are not stories of human supermen, but rather of the salvific effects of divine grace at work in the world and especially in sixth-century Italy.[37]

When we proceed to the next story, involving the monk who goes "AWOL," we find a male analogue to the female story

that precedes it. The story has many of the same elements: sudden death in troubled circumstances and redemption effected by the Sacred Host. Gregory does not say that the young monk did not intend to return to the monastery. But, alas, like the two nuns, he drops dead and has no chance to return to the monastery. And like the poor nuns, the grave also will not accept the body of this young man. No matter how often they rebury him, come morning, they find him lying outside the grave. In their anguish, the family beseeches Benedict to intervene, so he sends a consecrated Host to be placed on the breast of the monk and that gives him peace. Again, Benedict's prayers have their effect beyond the grave.

If we wonder why Gregory is so hard on a monk who departs, we should notice that his feeling was shared by all the ancient monastic legislators. Thus in RB 58.28, Benedict becomes enraged by the very thought of a monk leaving the vowed life he had promised. He strips the person of his monastic garb and more or less throws him out. In a sense, this thinking was part of the general understanding in medieval life that people had to stay put in their state of life. If they did not, the civil authority would hunt them down and return them to the monastery. And if necessary, they were deposited in a monastic prison.[94]

The same mentality is the background for the third story of this set, the one about the monk who persists in his demand to be released from the community. In this case, Benedict seems to lose his composure a bit: "He grew tired of his brashness and ordered him to get out." Certainly, at some periods of monastic history there was no question of such a thing: people had to conform to the monastic regimen or else. There was no going back on one's profession. But in this case Benedict has something up his sleeve. He is by no means ready to see one of his monks lost "to the devil."[95]

As soon as the monk walks out the gate of the monastery and starts down the hill (Monte Cassino is located on a high

bench on a mountainside), he meets a dragon. If the reader is anything like me, she is tempted at this point to put the book down and ask whether Gregory is telling fairytales. This is not a problem of translation, for the Latin word is *draco*, which simply means a fantastic mythic beast. Have we passed over the line here from hagiography loaded with miracles to fairytales that require us to suspend our normal critical powers?

If we read on a few lines we see that Gregory is not telling fairytales. For he tells us that this monk was in fact granted a vision of the devil in disguise. When he screams for help, the brothers come running but they cannot see the devil-dragon. Why? Because this vision has been granted to the fugitive monk alone, and for two reasons: (1) to scare him back into the monastery; and (2) to show him the real cause of his urge to wander, namely, the devil. And Gregory makes sure we understand that Benedict is the cause of this grace for the monk. He it is whose prayers enable the poor fellow to see the devil. So here is a case of a person being frightened into repentance.[10]

Quos debet solidos grato persoluit amico
Pauper, agente illi munera digna sene
Non marmor, non esse pater luceatur egenti
Post biduum nummos, sed locuplete prece

A Catholic layman who was heavily burdened with debt is given thirteen gold pieces which miraculously appeared on a chest filled with grain after Benedict prays for the poor man. XXVII 2

Section 12

At the Heart of the Signs of Power

XXVI-1 But I should not be silent about what I heard from a learned man named Aptonius. He told me that one of his father's slaves contracted elephantiasis. His hair was already falling out, his skin was swollen and the increasing putrefaction could not be hidden. The sick man was sent by his father to the man of God, and he was restored immediately to his previous state of health.

XXVII-1 Nor should I omit telling the story that his disciple, a man named Peregrinus, used to narrate. One day a pious Christian who was burdened by an urgent debt believed his only solution was to go to the man of God and tell him what a debt he had contracted. So he came to the monastery where he found the servant of God. He told him that he was being hard-pressed by his creditor for twelve *solidi*. The venerable father told him he did not have twelve *solidi*. But he consoled him with gentle words for his shortfall: "Go, and come back after two days, for today I have nothing to give you."

2 During those two days, Benedict occupied himself in prayer as was his wont. On the third day the man

burdened with debt returned. Suddenly they found thirteen *solidi* laying on the community chest, which was full of grain. The man of God ordered the money to be taken and given to the afflicted debtor. He said he should pay the twelve *solidi* and keep one for his personal expenses.

3 But I now return to the things that I learned from his disciples whom I named at the beginning of this book. A certain man was afflicted by the insane jealousy of his rival whom he hated so much that he put poison in his drink without his knowledge. Although this did not kill him, his skin changed color, and as the discoloration spread over his body, he looked like a leper. But when he had been brought to the man of God, he quickly received his health back. As soon as he touched him, he banished the discoloration from his skin.

XXVIII-1 Also at that time, when famine was pressing hard on Campania, the man of God had given all the goods of his monastery to various needy persons so that almost nothing remained except a little oil in a glass jar. Then a certain subdeacon named Agapitus arrived and loudly demanded that a bit of oil be given to him. The man of the Lord had decided to give away everything on earth so as to get it back in heaven. So he ordered that the little oil that remained be given to him. But when the cellarer heard this command, he hesitated to carry it out.

2 A little later Benedict asked if his order had been carried out. The monk said he had not donated the oil because if he had, there would have been none left for the monks. The angry abbot then told the others to throw the glass jar with the remains of the oil out the window. He did not want anything to remain in the monastery through disobedience. So this was done. Now this window overlooked a steep cliff strewn with boulders. When it was flung out, the jar landed on the rocks but it remained unbroken. It was as if it had not been thrown

Vas iacit ex specula sanctus, nec fundit oliuum,
Nec vitrum frangit, petra quod icta capit.
Larga facit, quod auara nequit manus, implet oliuo
Dolia pro phiala sanctus oliuifera.

Benedict reprimands the cellarer who refused during the famine to give to the needy the last of the monastery's oil. Then Benedict demonstrates the marvelous power trust in God possesses by miraculously filling a cask to overflowing. [XXVIII-I]

out, for it was not broken and the oil could not run out. The man of God told them to retrieve it, and he gave it unbroken to the petitioner. Then he called the monks together and chided the disobedient monk in front of them for his lack of faith and pride.

XXIX-1 When he had finished this rebuke, he gave himself to prayer along with the other brothers. Now in that place where he was praying with the brothers there was an empty, covered oil vat. While the holy man prolonged his prayer, the rising oil began to lift the cover of the vat. When it was raised and moved aside, the oil that had run over covered the pavement of the place where they prostrated in prayer. When the servant of God saw this, he immediately completed his prayer and the oil stopped running onto the floor.

2 Then he further admonished the faithless and disobedient brother to teach him to have faith and humility. The brother who was corrected for his own good felt ashamed, for the venerable father demonstrated by miracles the power of almighty God, which he had only intimated by his correction. From then on nobody could doubt the promises of the man who could in a moment fill an oil vat in place of a nearly empty jar of oil.

XXX-1 One day when he was going to the oratory of St. John, which was located on the top of the mountain, he met the old enemy disguised as a veterinarian. He was carrying a horn funnel and shackles. When he asked him "Where are you going?" he answered, "I'm going to the brothers, to give them something to drink." So venerable Benedict went to the oratory to pray. When he had finished, he rushed back. The evil spirit found one of the old monks taking a drink of water. Immediately he entered

into him, threw him to the ground and sorely tormented him. When the man of God returned from prayer, he saw how tortured he was. He simply gave him a slap that drove the evil spirit out of him. And it never dared to return.

COMMENTARY

We might note right away that the next four stories are attributed by Gregory to specific witnesses: Aptonius, Peregrinus and four disciples of Benedict. This kind of attribution certainly gives the account an aura of plausibility. It sounds as if Gregory could point to living witnesses to these events. But Francis Clark has noted that in fact none of these "witnesses" can be identified as a historical person.[91] And if the *Dialogues* were written long after the life of Gregory, as Clark contends, then these are simply fictitious witnesses. Still, our contention throughout this commentary is that these stories are "true" even if they never happened.

The first and third stories (XXVI and XXVII.3) are concerned with Benedict healing diseases of the skin. The first man has elephantiasis and the second is the victim of a deliberate poisoning. These healings probably do not seem very remarkable to us, but that is not because healings are frequent or typical in *Dialogue II*. In fact, these are the *only* healings in this whole book.[92] The reason why healings seem so "natural" to a Christian is that they are the staple of Jesus' ministry as portrayed in the gospels.

If we are looking for a specific healing of leprosy, probably Luke 17:11-19 would best fit the bill. In that case, ten lepers were healed, but only one returned to give thanks. So the lesson there is gratitude. In our story, the point is simply Benedict's ability to work signs of power, even over disease. And the most noteworthy thing here is the "thick" (detailed) description of the disease itself. I am not sure "elephantiasis"

refers to what modern medicine calls Hansen's disease (leprosy), but the effects seem to be similar.

The "skin disease" in story number three is not mysterious. It is the result of a crime. To judge from *Dialogue II*, in Benedict's world poisoning was a fairly widespread means of disposing of one's enemies. We recall the murderous monks of Vicovaro in chapter III, as well as the poisoned bread sent by Florentius to Benedict in chapter VIII. In this case, however, Benedict is not the target of the poisoner. Here again, Gregory gives us a detailed description of the symptoms: discoloration similar to leprosy. The detail that Benedict's touch is what healed the man is probably not a throwaway. In Luke 5:13, Jesus heals a leper with his touch, which clearly violates the Jewish taboo against touching lepers. Like Jesus, Benedict is not afraid to reach out to the needy.

Stories three and five are not about diseased persons but about those in great want. In the first case, a man has contracted a considerable debt, namely twelve *solidi*.[113] The debtor cannot think of any way to pay his creditor, so he comes to Benedict. But the saint doesn't have that kind of cash at hand either, so all he can do is pray. Of course, his prayers are better than any bank draft, so the money turns up on schedule. Indeed, a bit more than is needed, but that is also given to the debtor "for his expenses."

It is interesting to compare this story with another episode in the *Dialogues*, this one in *Dialogue* I.9, 10–13. In a narrative that is quite a bit longer and more detailed than the one we are analyzing, Bishop Boniface also relieves the debt of a supplicant. Like Benedict, the bishop also gently calms the petitioner and he also says a prayer. But unlike Benedict, he more or less steals the money from his nephew to give to the poor. For his part, Benedict prays much longer—fully two days. Probably as a monk he had more time for prayer than a busy bishop![114] But we should also notice that Benedict's habit of

extended and concentrated prayer is a factor in virtually every one of these miracle stories. Clearly, Gregory wants to spotlight the power of intercessory prayer.

The analogue to the story of the *solidi* is the one about the multiplication of oil. The setting is again a famine in the Campania, probably the same one that struck all of central Italy in 537.[25] We recall that the monks were very short of grain at that time, but in response to Benedict's prayer two hundred measures of flour showed up at the door. Now the problem is shortage of olive oil, which usually accompanies poor grain crops in the Mediterranean Basin. The focus here, though, is not on the need of the community but on the apparently brash request of a certain subdeacon for some oil.

Again, Benedict cannot turn away a petitioner. So he orders that the last bit of oil in the monastic jar to be given to the subdeacon. At this point, the community cellarer has had enough. He cannot understand how the abbot can blithely give away all that stands between the monks and—what is it, starvation or convenience? Anyway, he drags his heels and "hesitates to carry out the order." When Benedict finds out, he blows his top. Not only does he publicly tongue lash the offending cellarer once, but twice, reducing the poor fellow to abject repentance.[26]

Somebody who knows the books of Kings will probably have overtones of that ancient document ringing in her ears. In fact, this story recalls not one but two different prophets, Elijah and Elisha. During a terrible drought in Galilee, the prophet visited a poor country widow whom he asked for some food and drink (1 Kgs 17:1-16).[27] She replied that she was just going out to scrounge up lunch for her son and herself—before they would lay down and die. Elijah assures her by saying that she should still share her lunch. Then her supply of flour and oil will *never* run out.

Of course, to invoke that story is to compare Benedict with the widow, not the prophet. Never mind: both of them

decide to trust in the Lord and to disregard the threat of starvation. But Benedict does resemble the prophet Elisha. When another poor widow comes to him to report that her creditors are about to take her sons as slaves, the man of God orders her to assemble all the jars she can find. Then he tells her to start pouring the oil from one vessel into another until the whole house is full of overflowing vats of oil (2 Kgs 4:1-7).[158]

Benedict does not produce as much oil, but Gregory makes it sound as if he could have filled the whole district if he had *not* stopped praying. When he sees the empty vat overflowing with oil and running onto the pavement, he deliberately ceases prayer. Let that be a lesson to those whose prayers are as influential as those of Benedict. We see again how prayer is the key factor in these stories. No matter what the problem, Benedict turns to prayer. Of course, in this case, his monks pray with him. In fact, Gregory tells us that they all *prostrated* on the same pavement that was soon covered with oil.[159]

The story of the flowing oil is by far the best-developed one in this set, and it even includes a subplot. When Benedict learns that the cellarer has not given the subdeacon the last drop of oil, he angrily demands that the little flask be thrown right out the window. This extraordinary command is dutifully carried out, and the reader assumes that is the end of the flask and the oil. Anybody who has lived in Monte Cassino for a few days knows that there is a precipitous drop-off right outside the windows.[160] Nevertheless, in this case the laws of nature do not apply. Even though the glass flask lands on the rocks, it does *not* shatter. The Lord is not quite ready to obey all Benedict's orders.

Again, we might gain some purchase on this story by comparing it to a couple of examples from monastic literature previous to Gregory. One of the most famous, which occurs in the writings of John Cassian, tells of the monk John of Lycopolis.[1] When he is told by his spiritual master to throw out their last

bit of oil, John obeys without hesitation. Unlike Benedict's flask, however, John's does break and the oil is lost. What then is the moral of the story? Unquestioning obedience, even when it flies in the face of common sense. In fact, John's director orders him to act thus precisely to test his willingness to put aside his own will. In Cassian's view, which he claims was the view of the Egyptian monks, it does not make any difference whether the command makes any sense or not. Instant obedience is the key to spiritual growth.

No doubt Gregory's point is much the same. In fact, he says explicitly that Benedict "rebuked the disobedient monk in front of them for his lack of faith and pride." These two motives are repeated in a later verse: "He further admonished the faithless and disobedient brother to teach him to have faith and humility." In a sense, it does not matter if the flask broke or not: the ascetical point is the same. But on the other hand, if not a drop of oil remained, it could not have been given to Agapitus. Still, with a prodigious prayer like Benedict around, that would have been no problem.

A contemporary reader may find Benedict's reaction to the cellarer a bit extreme. Was it really necessary to dress him down in front of the whole community? A modern abbot who did this might risk alienating not only the culprit but the rest of the brothers, for the contemporary psyche is often too fragile to endure such a shaming experience. Before we judge Benedict or Gregory too harshly however, we should understand that the old monks were not as sensitive as we are to public correction. In Mediterranean society, life was (and is) lived outdoors and in front of everyone. One expects to be honored and shamed in public. In fact, some modern critics claim that people in that society obtain their self-worth precisely from public interactions of this sort.[11]

The story of Benedict's generosity with scarce resources has many connections with other such tales in the lives of the

saints. One of the most famous of all the ancient *vitae*, namely, the *Life of Martin* by Sulpicius Severus, tells of the time the saint was vesting for Mass in one of his parishes (he was bishop of Tours). When a ragged beggar came asking for clothes, Martin told the archpriest to give him his chasuble. Like Benedict's bursar, he too was hesitant because the vestment was needed for the liturgy. Also, like Benedict, Martin was irate and he showed it by celebrating Mass in the beggar's rags. Never one to let himself be hemmed in by rules or common sense, Martin was the prototype of the bold, even wild, witness to God's superabundant love for the poor."[1] At any rate, this is a very familiar theme in ancient hagiography: generosity plus hope brings God's favor. However, it may not always bring a material answer.

The sixth and final episode in this set is also one of the sketchiest. Benedict comes across the devil on the path up to the oratory of St. John. When questioned, the old enemy cheerfully announces that he is going to "give the brothers something to drink." Since he is carrying a horn funnel and shackles, it is not too hard to imagine what that means. At any rate, Benedict is not worried enough to postpone his prayers. But after he is finished, he rushes back to see what the evil one has done. Sure enough, he has one of the old monks writhing on the ground. Not to worry! Benedict merely slaps the poor fellow and that takes care of that. His slap is really a prolongation of his prayer.

Is it coincidental that Satan is carrying a horn funnel in this story? The same instrument (a horn) is used by the demons to *murder* a servant of Martin's monastery at Marmoutier near Tours.[2] Of course, here at Monte Cassino the case is not quite so dire, but diabolic possession is still no joke. At any rate, the correspondences between the *Life of Martin* and that of Benedict seem too dense to be ignored. And why should we ignore them? We remember that Benedict dedicated his main

oratory at Monte Cassino to St. Martin.[15] In fact, Martin was one of the very first monks in the Latin West, and for much of Europe he was even a more important patron saint than Benedict. Sulpicius' *Life of Martin* was almost as important a prototype of hagiography as the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius of Alexandria.

Benedict's glance miraculously breaks the heavy cord by which a farmer was bound by one of the Goths. The Goth, stunned at the hidden power that set his captive free, falls trembling to this knees and begs for prayers. [XXXI-3]

Section 13

Power and Prayer: Two Examples of a Single Thesis

2 PETER: I would like to know this: Did he always obtain such great miracles by the power of his prayer? Or did he sometimes work them by sheer willpower?

GREGORY: When necessity demands it, those who cling to God with a devout mind are able to perform wonders in both ways. Sometimes they work miracles through prayer, sometimes through power. John says: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12). Then what wonder if the sons of God from power are able to do miracles by power?

3 That they do miracles both ways is shown by Peter. He raised Tabitha from the dead by prayer, but he consigned the lying Ananias and Sapphira to death by a mere rebuke. We do not read that he prayed before their annihilation; he only condemned the fault that they had committed. So we can say that sometimes they performed these things from power, sometimes from prayer, since Peter took away life by a reprimand and gave it back by prayer.

4 Now I will recount some deeds done by the servant of God, Benedict, in which it is clear that he did one

miracle by power received from God, while he was able to do another through prayer.

XXVI-1 There was a certain Goth named Zalla who shared the Arian heresy at the time of King Totila. He burned with an insane hatred for religious men of the Catholic Church. If any monk or cleric crossed his path, he would not live to tell about it. One day, inflamed with the heat of avarice and panting for rapine, he afflicted a certain peasant with cruel torments and tortured him in various ways. Under torture, the peasant claimed that he had deposited his goods with the servant of God, Benedict. If his tormentor would believe him, he might temporarily suspend his cruelty and a few hours might be added to his life.

2 Then Zalla stopped torturing the peasant, but he bound his arms with stout thongs and began to drive him ahead of his horse. He wanted to meet this Benedict, who was the depositary of goods. So he led the peasant with trussed arms to the monastery of the holy man, whom he found sitting alone and reading at the entrance of the house. The peasant said to Zalla, who was following him in a fury: "There's the man I spoke about, Father Benedict!" When Zalla in his foaming wrath spotted Benedict, in the insanity of his perverted mind he thought he could bring about his accustomed terror. So he began to bellow: "Get up, get up, and fork over the goods of this lousy peasant!"

3 When he heard this, the man of God looked up from his reading. He saw Zalla and soon he also saw the peasant who was held bound. His glance fell on his bound arms, and the shackles began to loosen faster than any human hand could have undone them. So the man who had come in shackles suddenly stood unshackled. Faced with such a display of power, Zalla fell terrified to the earth. Bending his stiff and cruel neck to Benedict's feet, he commended himself to his prayers. The holy man did not rise from his reading but called the brothers

and told them to take Zalla inside for some blessed bread. When they brought him back, Benedict warned him to stop his crazy cruelties. Zalla departed a broken man and did not presume to demand anything more from the peasant whom Benedict set free, not by his touch but by his glance.

4 So, Peter, you see it is as I said: those who serve God most faithfully sometimes can do wonders even by power. The person who subdued the savage anger of the Goth without rising from his chair and who unraveled the thongs and knots that held the arms of the innocent man bound, this man showed by the speed of this miracle that he acted under the power he had received. I will also add what kind of great miracle he was able to obtain through prayer.

XXXII–1 One day Benedict went out with the brothers to work in the fields. Now a certain peasant came to the monastery looking for Father Benedict. He carried the body of his dead son in his arms, and he was beside himself with grief at his loss. When they told him that the father was with the brothers in the field, he laid the body of the dead child at the door of the monastery. In his great grief he rushed out to find the venerable father.

2 At the same time, the man of God was already returning from fieldwork with the brothers. As soon as the distraught peasant saw him, he began to shout: "Give me back my son, give me back my son!" As soon as the man of God heard this cry, he stopped and said: "Have I taken your son?" To which he answered: "He is dead. Come and raise him up!" When the servant of God heard this, he was very sad: "Leave me, brothers, leave me," he said. "These things are not for us but for the holy apostles. Why do you want to load burdens on us that we cannot carry?" But the man persisted in his demand, for his grief drove him to it. He swore he would not leave until Benedict had raised his son from the dead. So the servant of

God asked him: "Where is he?" The peasant answered: "Look, his body is lying at the door of the monastery."

When the man of God arrived with the brothers, he knelt down and prostrated on the child's body. Then he got up and raised his hands to heaven, saying: "Lord, do not look on my sins but on the faith of the man who asked that his son be raised up. Return to this body the soul you have taken from it." Scarcely had he completed his prayer when the soul returned so that the whole body of the boy shuddered. To the eyes of all present it looked as if it had been made to tremble by a miraculous blow of some sort. So he took him by the hand and returned him live and well to his father.

It is obvious, Peter, that he did not have this miracle in his own power, since he prostrated to ask for the power to work it.

PETER: What you say is clear because you prove the words by deeds.

COMMENTARY

The material in this unit is unlike anything else in *Dialogue II* in that it features a theoretical proposition followed by a couple of examples. In this case, the abstract proposition is that the saints effect miracles in one of two ways: either through their prayers or through the power bestowed on them by God.[16] The example for a miracle wrought by prayer is given in the story of the resuscitation of the dead child by St. Benedict. In the other example-story, namely, the liberation of the peasant oppressed by Zalla, no prayer is mentioned. In Gregory's mind, this must mean that it is a miracle of power.

This pattern of stating first an abstract principle and then following it with concrete examples will become quite prominent toward the end of *Dialogue III*, and it will be the dominant structural element of *Dialogue IV*.[17] Another structural pattern

that exists in this material has to do with the use of chiasm. This is an ABCBA pattern that may escape the eye of all but the most acute literary critic.[18] In chapter VIII.8, at the end of the Subiaco cycle, Gregory explicitly points to Moses, Elisha, Peter, Elijah, and David. In order to highlight Peter. Now in the Monte Cassino cycle, we find the chiasm: devil, Goths, food, Goth, devil.[19]

There is another pattern that makes this unit comparable to the first miracle of power, which is the story of the two nuns in *Dialogue II*.XXIII. In that passage, the story is followed by a short theoretical discussion, just as it is here. Likewise, in XXIII and XXIV, we find someone (the nuns) liberated and then someone (a young monk) restored to his proper place. Here in XXXI and XXXII, the same sequence occurs. The peasant is freed and the youth is restored to his father. A third similarity to the story of the nuns is that Benedict is compared there to the apostle Peter, just as he is here in XXXII. Since Peter has not appeared in *Dialogue II* since the Subiaco cycle, namely, the story of the rescue of Placid in VII, his reappearance in this part of the book is noteworthy.

At the risk of boring and confusing the reader, I have introduced this bit of structural criticism for a couple reasons. First, it suggests that, far from being a simple, artless string of folktales, the *Dialogues* are a careful literary creation. They are crafted by someone who has a profound knowledge of how to put together a well-structured book. The presence of multiple echoes back and forth between the elements of the book is characteristic of sophisticated composition.

Second, even if the structural framework of *Dialogue II* is somewhat hidden and perhaps not even fully evident to the *author*, it still gives the book a certain kind of tonality that can be very satisfying to the reader. As we read along, we are continually half aware that we have seen some of these stories before, or at least elements of them. We don't go back and look for the repetitions or the resonances, but they are there. As in

a piece of classical music, there is a framework that gives the reader a sense of security and balance. The structural critic can point out exactly what is going on, but even the casual reader can still feel it and take pleasure in it.

As regards the first episode where Zalla confronts Benedict with his prisoner, it is very reminiscent of the previous material on the Goths in XIII. In that passage, the Gothic king Totila sends his aide to hamboozle Benedict. But of course the ruse fails and Riggo, the false king, is reduced to trembling. Totila himself meekly crawls to Benedict for a blessing later. Here too Zalla attempts to cow the man of God into submission. Instead of that, however, Benedict works such an amazing deed of miraculous power that the raving Goth collapses into a state of obsequious terror.

In itself, the freeing of a prisoner is not an unusual theme in ancient hagiography. Starting with the Acts of the Apostles (5:17 ff., 16:25 ff.), where both Peter and Paul are freed from their chains in prison, the miracle of divine liberation runs through the lives of the saints.[39] But there seems to be a distinctive quality about Benedict's act of power. In the other cases in the lives of the saints, this miracle is effected by the relics (bones) of a dead saint, but in this case it is a living saint who brings off the feat. Or if the other saints did work to free prisoners when they were alive, they only did this indirectly. That is, the jailers were moved to release the captives on their request.

But the case of Benedict is even more remarkable in the way it is told. Far from exerting himself in any strenuous act of wonderworking, Benedict calmly glances at the bonds on the arms of the peasant and they fly off. Notice the artistry in the way Gregory contrasts the rage of the wild man Zalla with the exquisite poise of the saint. What could be more telling than a simple glance that could break the bonds of torture and possible death? Even though Zalla is presented as a bloodthirsty brigand, he can understand deeds of power, and he

immediately falls prostrate in abject whimpering. So the power of chaos and evil is reduced to nothing with a mere glance.

In his exegetical comments that follow this story, Gregory compares Benedict with St. Peter striking dead Ananias and Sapphira with a mere rebuke (Acts 5:1-11).[11] This seems like a questionable choice of a biblical parallel for this miracle. It is true that it fits Gregory's need for a miracle without an accompanying prayer. But it is hard to overlook the fact that Peter struck two people dead for a simple lie.[12] For his part, Benedict does not strike anybody dead. He only acts to bring people back to life and to set them free. I would suggest that a much more fitting biblical parallel to this story would be the action of Yahweh God at the Red Sea. When the Egyptians were closing in on the chosen people in their flight of escape, ". . . in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down upon the host of the Egyptians, and discomfited the host of the Egyptians" (Exod 14:24). Granted, the effect of this glance is to annihilate a whole army; but at least the deed has the same quality of massive power working through a simple, sovereign glance.

Perhaps a word might be added concerning Zalla's status as an Arian. Gregory is very explicit that this Goth was not only a thug, but a heretic. In addition to that, he complains that Zalla was especially cruel to the clergy of the Catholic Church. This is not the first time that Gregory goes out of his way to let us know that the Goths were deficient in religion. In XIII.1, he calls King Totila an "unbeliever," which no doubt refers to his Arian Christianity and not atheism. Still, is it not interesting that Benedict himself does not upbraid Zalla for his Arianism? He merely gives him a *benedictio*, that is, a meal of blessed bread.

Benedict's reaction, which is after all under the control of Gregory's pen, should be taken as a salutary caution. For we now know that the Arianism of the Goths was not necessarily very doctrinaire. They had been converted a century

previously by Arian missionaries, but it is not clear at all that they understood their own Christianity to be so very different from the mainstream of orthodoxy.[13] It is more likely that a Gothic brigand like Zalla would look on Catholic churchmen as a source of plunder rather than as theological enemies.[14]

The second story, which is intended to showcase a miracle brought about through prayer, involves the raising of a dead boy to life. We are told that this is the child of a peasant, a *rusticus*. And he behaves like a true bumpkin, shouting and wailing. Worst of all, he refuses to leave until Benedict resuscitates his dead son. But before we prejudge the man, we should remember that he is from the same social group that Benedict recently converted from paganism to Christianity. We remember that Benedict, upon his arrival at Monte Cassino, smashed their idols and took over their temples. Far from holding this against the saint, the locals now hold the saint in such high regard that they think he can raise the dead.

As for Benedict, he is quite nonplussed by this demand. The scene is rather violent. First the peasant shouts "Give me back my son!" Benedict's first response is uncomprehending: "Have I taken your son?" But he soon enough sees what is at stake and he recoils in fear: "Leave me brothers. These things are not for us but for the holy apostles. Why do you want to load burdens on us that we cannot carry?" We might wonder why the "brothers" should leave him when it was the single peasant who was the problem. Perhaps this story was imported from a different source where it involved a group of people.

Nevertheless, Benedict does not send the peasant home with a dead child, he raises the lad from the dead. His manner of doing so evokes memories in anyone who knows the Old Testament well and especially the books of Kings. He prostrates on the dead body of the child and then prays intently. The immediate effect upon the corpse is resuscitation. The figure that first springs to mind is Elijah. He too revived a dead

son, and most important for Gregory, he did it by prayer.[125] Still, it is hard to ignore the fact that Benedict first prostrates on the boy's body. That calls to mind Elisha, who did the same for the dead child of the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:18-37).[126] Unlike either of the prophets, both of whom performed their miracles behind closed doors, Benedict does his out in the open for everyone to see. He was not anxious to do such a feat but he is not ashamed of it either.

What are we to make of this remarkable raising of the dead? It certainly helps to put it in context. First of all, we should be aware that this is the *crowning* miracle of the whole of *Dialogue II*. Occurring as it does at the very end of the Monte Cassino cycle (XI–XXXII), it is the last wonder performed by Benedict. And it is crowning in another sense, because there is no greater feat than raising the dead to life. Even Jesus, before his own resurrection, only resuscitated a few persons.[127] In the entire hagiography of the Eastern monastic saints, not one of them ever raises anybody to life from the dead.[128]

Yet the same cannot be said about the Western hagiography. For example, in his exaltation of St. Martin, Sulpicius Severus claims that he raised no fewer than three people from the dead.[129] But it is important to note that the Gallic author was deliberately trying to show that Martin was greater than the Eastern monks. Can the same be said for Gregory? At least we can say this: he is not reticent about resuscitations. At the beginning of *Dialogue I*, Libertinus is shown raising the dead. But more saliently, at the end of *Dialogue I*, Bishop Fortunatus raises a man from the dead.[130] Actually, Benedict's miracle has many details like that of Fortunatus, which makes it somewhat less impressive historically. It does not mean that it did not happen, but it cannot be denied that Gregory is striving mightily to show that Italy has as many great saints as any other place.[131]

Postulat, vt frater maneat, soror vnica nocte:
Hic negat; à superis ista precatur opem;
Qui prece non vltro manuit, prece vincitur, cœlum
Hunc tenet inuitum, fulgure, vento, et aquis.

When Benedict's sister, Scholastica, visits her brother they discuss the joys of heaven till morning (XXXIII-2)

Section 14

Benedict and Scholastica

XXXII-4 PETER: I ask you, can the saints do anything they want, and do they obtain what they wish to obtain?

XXXIII-1 GREGORY: Peter, who in the world was greater than Paul? He asked the Lord three times to be free of the thorn in his flesh, but he could not obtain what he wished. For this reason I must tell you the blessed Benedict also had a wish that was not fulfilled.

2 His sister, Scholastica, who was consecrated to almighty God from her childhood, used to come to see him once a year. The man of God would come down to visit her in a house owned by the monastery not far from the gate. One year she came as usual, and her venerable brother came down to her with some disciples. They spent the whole day in praise of God and pious conversation. When night shadows were already falling, they took a meal together. The hour grew late and they still sat conversing of holy things. Then his sister, the consecrated woman (nun), asked him saying, "I beg you, do

not leave me tonight! Let us speak till morning of the joys of the heavenly life." He responded, "What are you saying, sister? There is no way I can remain outside the monastery!"

3 Now the sky was so clear that not a cloud could be seen. When the nun heard her brother's refusal, she put her hands on the table with the fingers intertwined. Then she put her head on her hands to pray to almighty God. When she raised her head from the table, there was such thunder and lightning and such a downpour of rain that neither venerable Benedict nor the brothers who were with him could set foot outdoors. The nun, by bowing her head in her hands, flooded the table with tears and in this way changed a clear sky into rain. The rain did not follow long after her prayer, but the coincidence of the prayer and the downpour was such that the thunder roared when she raised her head. And the rain fell as soon as she raised her head.

4 When the man of God saw that he could not return to the monastery because of the thunder and lightning and because of the cloudburst, he was dismayed and said: "God forgive you, sister. What have you done?" She answered, "Look, I asked you and you wouldn't listen. So I asked my Lord and he listened. Now leave me if you can, and go back to the monastery." He could not, however, go outside the shelter. He was not willing to remain freely there, so he had to remain against his will. And so it happened that they stayed up all night, and they satisfied each other with holy discourse on the spiritual life.

5 That is why I said he desired something without being able to attain it. For if we study the mentality of the venerable man, there is no doubt that he wanted the same fine weather to continue as when he came down. But instead of what he wanted, he encountered a miracle wrought by almighty God at the heartfelt prayer of a woman. It is not surprising that the woman who wished to visit longer with her brother was more effective than he was on that occasion. For

according to the saying of John, "... God is love" (1 John 4:8). So it was entirely right that she who loved more should accomplish more.

PETER: I confess that what you say pleases me very much!

XXXIV–1 GREGORY: The next day the holy woman returned to her convent, and the man of God went back to the monastery. Three days later he was standing in the monastery when he looked up and saw the soul of his sister leave her body and fly to the heavenly heights in the form of a dove. Elated by her glorification, he gave thanks to almighty God with hymns and songs of praise. Then he announced her death to the brothers.

2 He immediately sent them to bring her body to the monastery. And he had them place it in the tomb he had prepared for himself. In that way it came about that those who had always been of one mind in the Lord were not even bodily separated in their tomb.

COMMENTARY

The story of Benedict and Scholastica is one of the best-known episodes in *Dialogue II*. Since it is virtually the only source we have for this woman who is the patron of the Benedictine nuns, the story gets repeated every feast of St. Scholastica (February 11). In itself it is a well-developed and rather compelling tale, and since it occurs as the last of the miracle stories in this book, it must have had considerable importance in the mind of St. Gregory. Since it is the last miracle, it serves as a transition to the next and last section of *Dialogue II*, which contains some visions. And it segues into Gregory's account of the death of his hero, St. Benedict.[11]

Even though this whole second book of the *Dialogues* is devoted to trumpeting the holiness and virtue of Benedict, this

particular story does not add to his luster. In fact, he comes out second best to his sister in this case. As we will see, this does not mean that Benedict was a lesser saint than she, but it does take some of the edge off of his towering reputation for holiness. Indeed, Gregory includes this story precisely to make the point that even the great saints could not always do what they wanted. Actually, this is not the first time Gregory made this point in this book. In two earlier places he showed that Paul, David, Nathan, and Elisha were not given the grace for which they asked God.[13] This does not imply any fault on their part. It merely stresses that the saints themselves are helpless without the grace of almighty God.

It is also possible to look at this story with feminine eyes, or at least from the standpoint of Scholastica. In her case, there is no failure: she prays fervently to almighty God and he immediately grants her what she asks. Even though Benedict complains rather miserably that what she asks is out of place, nevertheless it still happens.[14] In other words, God will decide what prayers to answer and what prayers to ignore. No matter how difficult Benedict finds it to understand the present situation, he is clearly shown to be less than wise.

If the story shows Scholastica excelling her brother in love, it also serves to somewhat humanize Benedict. For one thing, it shows him insisting on a point of the Rule that says that the monk should not remain outside the monastery any more than is absolutely necessary.[15] All through Gregory's account, Benedict is shown to be somewhat of a stickler for the customs and the rules of the monastic order. We saw this especially at Vicovaro, where it nearly got him killed.[16] But Benedict's punctiliousness surfaces throughout the book, even to the point of bringing about severe punishments when monks and nuns violate the rules as he understands them.[17] But in this case, Benedict's love for the Rule seems to pass

over the line into legalism. At the very least, his insistence on the law is shown to be rather lame in the face of the love that Scholastica shows.

It should also not go unremarked that this is a very funny story! What could be more hilarious than the comeuppance of a domineering brother in the face of a sister who was wiser in the ways of the heart? The very spectacle of rain pouring down in an instant to prevent the monks from running home is quite delicious. Just as there is something awesome about monastic (or military) discipline, there is also something utterly ridiculous about it when it wanders off into hair-splitting and silly rigidity. But in this case Benedict's legalism not only violated common sense; it violated love. And Gregory makes it clear that Benedict deserved what he got.

Of course, we also can say that he learned his lesson. If he had not, he might have sat there all night wet and fuming. But he did not. Gregory says that the holy twins spent the night happily discoursing on the joys of heaven. So the story has a happy ending. Indeed, it really must end this way, since it is meant to introduce the topic of the death of both Scholastica and Benedict. In that sense, it is clear that Scholastica had a strong premonition of this fact. That is the real reason why she did not want to leave off their conversation, for she knew it would go on for all eternity.

As usual, it is possible to add a bit more depth and definition to these stories by means of comparison. First, we might recall a similar story from the beginning of *Dialogue II*. In chapter 1.1-3, Benedict deals with another important woman in his life, namely, his housekeeper. But when her love threatens to smother him or hold him back in his quest for God, or at least for ascetic purity, he slips away from her. At that point, Gregory makes this escape look like a rather good idea. Even though the reader might see it as somewhat callous, at least it seems to lead to another stage of Benedict's growth

Now, however, when Benedict attempts to slip away from a woman, namely, Scholastica, he is unable to do so. On the surface, he is prevented from doing so because it is pouring rain. But on a deeper level, one might suspect that God thwarted Benedict this time because his leaving would not have been what he needed. After a long period of progress in personal and legislative discipline, Benedict had reached a stage where he needed a lesson in love. The Rule had taken him as far as it could, and now he needed to give himself over to love.[138] Indeed, he needed to give himself over to the love God had for him and the love his sister had for him. At this final stage of his maturity, the great legislator needed to become like a little child again. He also needed to become more human so that he could better enjoy the company of God in heaven.

Someone with a good biblical memory might also notice the similarity of this story with one of the gospel episodes. We remember that Jesus once had his feet anointed by a local woman who crashed the banquet of the Pharisee to do so (Luke 7:36-50). When the Pharisee sourly upbraided Jesus for permitting this undignified scene to take place, the Master answered: ". . . her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much . . ." (Luke 7:47). Scholastica, of course, was not a loose woman. But she did love much; in fact she loved so much that God could not refuse her prayer.

If we want to push the comparison further, we could also say that Benedict played the part of the Pharisee in this episode at Monte Cassino.[139] Of course, he was somewhat more justified in his pious horror at what his sister had done, but he was still morally muddled. It does seem that Gregory is quite willing to admit that moral legalism can find itself at loggerheads with the Gospel itself. When he quotes First John that "God is love," he is pointing to the bedrock ethos on which the entire Christian enterprise rests. And he is also providing us with a helpful principle for monastic life. After all, the final

purpose of monasticism is not discipline. It is divine contemplation. Scholastica did not urge Benedict to forget about his rules so they could indulge in dissipation. She was intent on sharing the happiness of the vision of God that both of them so ardently longed for.

Nocte Pater media prospectat ab aere sub uno
Mox solis radio quicquid in orbe latet:
Germani aspiciens animam superastra choreis
Deferri angelicis, ardet amore senex.

In the dead of night, Benedict is praying by his window while the rest of the monastery sleeps. While at the window, he sees a flood of light and the soul of a bishop being carried by angels to heaven in a ball of fire. [XXXV-1]

Section 15

The Vision of the World in the Light of God

XXXV-1 On another occasion, the deacon Servandus, who was also abbot of his monastery, which had been built by the patrician Liberius in the Campania, came to visit Benedict as was his custom. He spent time at the monastery so they could exchange the sweet words of the spiritual life, for he was also a man who deeply understood the heavenly graces. And by discussing the sweet food of the heavenly fatherland they could at least taste it with longing, even if they could not enjoy it perfectly.

2 When the time for sleep came, Benedict went to the upper story of the tower and Deacon Servandus stayed on the lower level. A stairway connected the lower with the upper part. In front of the tower was a large house where the disciples of both abbots were sleeping. When the brothers were still asleep, the man of God, Benedict, got up to watch in prayer before the time for the Night Office. Standing at the window and praying to almighty God in the middle of the night, he suddenly saw a light pour down that routed all the shadows. It shone with such splendor that it surpassed daylight, even though it was shining in the darkness.

3 A wonderful thing followed in this vision, for as Benedict reported later, the whole world was brought before his eyes as if collected in a single ray of sunlight. As the venerable father gazed intently in the dazzling splendor of this light, he saw the soul of Germanus, bishop of Capua, carried to heaven in a fireball by angels.

4 Then, wishing to enlist a witness for such a miracle, Benedict loudly called Deacon Servandus, repeating his name two or three times. When the latter had been aroused by this cry that was so unusual for Benedict, he went upstairs and took a look. What he saw was but a fraction of the light. While Servandus stood stunned by such a miracle, the man of God recounted to him the whole sequence of events. Benedict immediately sent a message to the pious man Theopropus, who lived in the town of Cassino. He should send someone that very night to the city of Capua to find out what happened to Bishop Germanus and report back. This was done, and the messenger found that Bishop Germanus had indeed died. Upon closer enquiry, he learned that he had died at the very moment when the man of God had learned of his ascent to heaven.

5 PETER. This is a wonderful thing, and I am absolutely amazed by it! But what you have told me—that the whole world was revealed to him gathered in a single ray of sunlight—this is quite beyond my experience or even my imagination. Exactly how could one man take in the whole world?

6 GREGORY. Hold fast to what I am telling you, Peter: to a person who sees the Creator, every creature looks narrow by comparison. No matter how little divine light she sees with, everything created seems small. For the capacity of the mind is expanded by the light of interior contemplation. It is so enlarged by God that it becomes greater than the world. Indeed, the soul becomes greater than itself through contemplation. For when the contemplative soul is ravished by the light of God, it is dilated. When it looks down in its

elevated state it understands the insignificance of things in a way it could not when it remained below. Now, a person who could see a fiery ball and angels mounting to heaven, that one certainly must have been seeing with the light of God. So why is it surprising that he saw the whole world concentrated before him if he himself was lifted out of the world in the light of the spirit?

7 When it is said that the whole world was collected before his eyes, this does not mean that heaven and earth were shrunk, but that the soul was expanded. Swept up into God, it can easily see whatever is beneath God. Thus to that light that lights things for the exterior eyes, there corresponds an interior light in the mind. When it has raised the soul on high, it shows her how narrow are all things below.

8 PETER: I can see that it was useful for me to not understand what you said. For your explanation because of my dullness has clarified things so much. But now that you have made things plain to me, please return to your narrative of the saint's life.

COMMENTARY

We come now to one of the most memorable of all the scenes of Gregory's *Life of Benedict*, and indeed one of the most famous episodes in all of hagiography. Shortly before his death, Benedict has a remarkable vision of the light of heaven. And in this light he sees gathered up the whole world. He also sees the soul of his friend Germanus ascending to heaven.

Before we plunge into the significance of this vision, we might ask about its historicity; in other words, did it actually happen? In fact, we have reason to wonder, since we know for sure that Bishop Germanus died in AD 541. But it is also quite certain that Benedict himself did not die before AD 542.[110] This, of course, does not prove that Benedict did not have a

vision of Germanus. Very likely Gregory has simply *moved* that vision to the end of Benedict's life so as to corroborate his theme of the last things and also the death of Benedict himself. This is an example of Gregory's creative rearrangement of the details of the life of the saint in order to develop certain spiritual themes.

As we have moved through *Dialogue II*, we have noticed that various themes and motifs tend to repeat themselves. This kind of *syntaxis* gives the narrative the underlying feeling of continuity and it contributes to a subconscious sense of structure. As another example, this particular story has the same structure as the preceding one.[9] In both cases, Benedict is visited by a spiritual friend (Scholastica and Servandus). He has long discussions of the things of God with both of them in the daytime, and in both cases there is a miracle at night. Benedict has a vision of the ascension of a soul in both episodes. And he sends messengers to learn about a death both times. There can be little question that Gregory has arranged both stories on the same framework.

Still, there is a big difference here from the Scholastica story in that our hero was "defeated" in the first case but here he "triumphs." From the standpoint of hagiographic thinking, it simply would not have been appropriate to end the life of the saint with a negative example. So the book comes to an end (almost) with an example of the saint at the height of his contemplative life. Not only is this story the final and culminating episode of Benedict's life, it is also a major advance on his own development. We have seen that Scholastica taught him something about love. Now we can say that he has come to a deeper understanding of the world itself. In the Prologue, Gregory says about the young saint that "He despised the glory of the world as so much dust." A more literal translation at that point would have been: "He looked down on the flower of the world as so much dust."[10] At that point one might have

been forgiven a bit of skepticism, for the callow youth hardly *knew* the true beauty of the world.

Now at the end of his life, Benedict again *looks* at the world.[43] More precisely, he is granted a special vision of it. At first this vision might seem to be another downgrade of the world. After all, it is said to be focused in a single ray of the light coming from heaven. Still, one might wonder whether "small" in this case means "paltry."[44] After all, the world that the astronauts first saw from the moon was also quite small, but it was lovely enough to have sent them into raptures. And I think that it is warranted here also to claim that Benedict has come to a new appreciation of the beauty of creation at the end of his life. At least we cannot say that Benedict positively *despised* the world all through his life.

At any rate, we can now turn our attention to the three elements of Benedict's vision. First, he rises before Night Vigils and sees a great light from heaven. As a matter of fact, Gregory tells us of another monk, named Victorinus Aemilianus, who did the same thing.[45] As in this story, there is a witness in the person of the monk's abbot. But there is also a great difference from Benedict, for Victorinus is said to be a great sinner who came to the monastic life to atone for his past life. His vision and the message that accompanies it assures him that his sin has been forgiven. Benedict, however, is not a great sinner but a great contemplative for whom the vision is a prelude to his future with God in heaven.

When we come to the second feature of the vision, namely, the sight of the whole creation concentrated in a single ray of light, we are reminded of a famous story from classical literature.[46] In his *De Republica*, Cicero tells of the "Dream of Scipio," in which this old Roman noble was granted a vision of his grandfather, Scipio the Elder. In this dream, which he had in his youth,[47] he too was shown the earth and told that no matter how glorious it looks, it really is small and so is

its glory. So Scipio is warned not to rely on the praises of the world. All one can do is to serve the Roman Republic to the best of one's ability and then one will "go to heaven." Or more precisely, one will rise to heights of the stars from whence one has emanated in the first place.

Before we go further, the reader might wonder what on earth (pardon the pun!) a story from pagan Rome is doing in the pious context of Gregory's *Dialogue*? As a matter of fact, this whole episode is quite unusual in that no biblical warrants are brought forward to bolster the story. And in this case it does appear that a completely non-Christian tale lies somewhere in the background. But would the pious Gregory have known such a tale? Very likely, since Cicero was required reading in the education of all children in late antiquity. As an aristocrat, Gregory had received the best education Rome had to offer. And Jerome, who had a bad conscience about the amount of pagan literature he knew, still quotes this same Dream of Scipio in one of his letters.[48]

While it seems fairly certain that Gregory is influenced by Cicero in this case, there is still a great deal of difference in these two stories.[49] First of all, Benedict does not have a "dream" but a "vision." Indeed, Gregory seems quite anxious to prove this vision did *not* take place in a dream: that is why he places such heavy emphasis on the presence of Servandus as a witness. Note that Benedict does not just tell his friend what he saw. Servandus also sees the heavenly light, although in an attenuated form.[50] And it is obvious that Benedict himself wants to make sure he was not dreaming and also that other people know he was not dreaming.[51]

But the more important difference between Scipio and Benedict lies in the simple fact that the dream of the former is *cosmic*, while the vision of the latter is *mystic*. What does this mean? It does not mean that Scipio and his creator Cicero do not have an elevated notion of truth and reality. Far from it!

They have an amazing cosmic vision, and a very exalted view of civic duty. One might almost say that they are involved in a kind of secular sanctity.

Nonetheless, these old Romans did not believe in the transcendent. They did not believe that the world was created by an all-powerful god. Rather, they thought that the world is eternal, with no beginning and no end. And when Scipio's grandfather promised him an exalted future, he was not thinking of what we call heaven. Yet they did think that humans possess something like a soul. They even speculated that this soul is spherical, and that these spheres will eventually ascend to the highest[12] heavens.

For his part, however, Benedict does not have a cosmic dream or even a cosmic vision. He is fully within the realm of Christian mysticism, and so what he sees is not of this world at all. When he sees the whole of creation summed up in a tiny ball, the context is simply the immensity of *God himself*. We know that Benedict will soon leave this world, but he will not ascend to the stars. He will go to be with God, his creator, in heaven.

Before we leave this magnificent vision, we should note that it also has a counterpart in earlier monastic literature. In fact, a similar vision of a soul ascending to God occurs in the famous *Life of Antony*[13] written by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria a long time before *Dialogue II*. In that case, Antony sees the soul of his friend Amoun, the founder of the monastic colony of Nitria, mounting to heaven in glory. Since this *Life* was very well known all over the Christian world by the time of Gregory, it could have been in the back of his mind. At any rate, Athanasius was certainly thinking of the Christian heaven when he showed Amoun ascending.

Angelicam duxit vitam Benedictus ab ortu
Quam sua commendat lex, & honesta manus.
Hunc quicumque sequi cupit, hac se lege teneret;
Nec sanctus alter erit, pastor in orbe pius.

With all the renown gained by his miracles, Benedict is not less outstanding for the wisdom of his teaching. He hands down his teachings in the rule he gives his brothers and sisters. [XXXVI-I]

Section 16

Death, Glory, and the Life Beyond

XXXVI-1 GREGORY: I would love to tell more stories about this venerable father, Peter, but I am deliberately skipping certain points so as to hurry on to recount the deeds of others. But I don't want you to miss the fact that among the many miracles that made him famous, the man of God's teaching also flashed forth brilliantly. For he wrote a Rule for monks that was outstanding for its discretion and limpid in its diction. If anyone wants to examine his life and customs more closely, they can find in the same Rule all that he modeled by his conduct. For the holy man could in no way teach other than he lived.

XXXVII-1 Now in the same year when he was to die, he announced the day of his most holy death to certain disciples who lived with him. And he did the same for some who lived at a distance. He insisted that those who were present not broadcast what they had heard. And he told those absent by what sort of sign they would know his soul was leaving his body.

2 Six days before his death, he commanded that his grave be opened. Soon he was seized with fever, and he was exhausted by its burning heat. He became weaker as the days went by, and on the sixth day he had his disciples carry him into the oratory. There he fortified himself for death by receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord. Then, with his weak body held up by his disciples, he stood with his hands raised toward heaven and breathed forth his last as he prayed.

3 Now, on that same day an identical vision of him was granted to two of the brothers, one of whom was staying in the monastery and the other at a distance. They saw a carpeted street brilliant with countless lamps. It led from the east side of his monastery straight up to heaven. Standing on it was an old man in shining garments who asked them if they knew whose path it was they were looking at. But they told him they did not know. He said to them: "This is the path on which Benedict, beloved of the Lord, is going up to heaven." Thus they who were absent understood from the sign given them that the holy man had died. They did so just as the disciples who were present saw it with their own eyes.

4 He was buried in the oratory of blessed John the Baptizer, which he himself had constructed on the destroyed altar of Apollo.

XXXVIII 1 Just as he did splendid miracles in the cave of Subiaco where he first lived, he still does them for those whose faith requires them. Lately something happened that I will now recount. A certain woman lost her mind and went completely mad. Day and night she roamed the mountains and valleys, the woods and the fields. She only slept when fatigue made her rest. One day she got far off the beaten path and came to the cave of the blessed man Father Benedict. Not knowing where she was, she went in. When she came out in the morning, she

was in her right mind, as if she had never been insane. And for the rest of her life she remained in the good health she had received.

2 PETER: Why do we often find the same thing in the patronage of the martyrs? They give more favors by their relics than by their living bodies, and they perform greater signs apart from their graves.

3 GREGORY: Peter, there is no doubt that the holy martyrs can perform great miracles where they lie buried. Likewise, they grant countless miracles to those who seek them with pure motives. But weak minds may doubt that the martyrs are accessible to prayers in places where their bodies are not present. So they must show greater signs where weak minds can doubt their presence. As for those whose minds are fixed on God, the more faith they have, the better they know that the martyrs are not deaf to petitions, even when their graves are elsewhere.

4 That is why the Truth himself, in order to bolster the faith of his disciples, said to them: "... if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you ..." (John 16:7). Since we know that the Holy Spirit always proceeded from the Father and from the Son, why does the Son say he will depart so that he might come who never departs from the Son? Because the disciples longed to always see the Lord with physical eyes, because they saw him in the flesh. So he was quite justified in saying to them: "If I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you." It is as if he would say: "If I do not physically depart, I cannot show you the love of the Spirit. For unless you cease to see me in the flesh, you will never learn to love me spiritually."

5 PETER: I fully agree.

GREGORY: We need to stop talking for a while if we want to recount the miracles of other saints. Let us recoup our powers of speech by silence.

COMMENTARY

In ancient biography and hagiography, there are two basic elements: deeds and character.[55] That is to say that the life of the hero is developed by speaking of the great things he or she accomplished, plus an attempt at describing the person's moral and spiritual qualities. What is more, in many *Lives*, the second element is deferred to the end of the account. Just before the death of the hero or saint, the author tries to summarize the qualities that made that person memorable.

In the case of St. Benedict, we find a variation of this pattern. Of course, *Dialogue II* tells us about Benedict's mighty deeds; indeed, it is one long string of miracles. But when Gregory comes to the end of the account, he does not fulfill the other half of the traditional assignment. Instead of a sketch of Benedict's spiritual physiognomy, the Pope tells us that Benedict wrote a wonderful monastic Rule. And he cleverly adds that if we want to know what the saint was like, all we have to do is to read his Rule. For he surely did not live other than he legislated.

In extolling Benedict's Rule, Gregory uses two memorable expressions. "The Rule is outstanding for its discretion and limpid in its diction." The first claim does not raise any surprise, since most commentators on the RB praise it for its moderation. This is generally true, but there are some passages of RB that betray a certain ferocity and even fanaticism.[56] As for the beauty of the language of the Rule, that might surprise us. Not only is the diction of that document rather ordinary, but we might also wonder where Benedict learned to write so well. Wasn't he the one who cut short his classical education in Rome?[57]

At this point it is tempting to recall the now-old study of Kassius Hallinger, who questioned whether Gregory had ever read the Rule of Benedict.[58] According to the German

monk, there is no proof at all that Gregory's monastery on the Coelian Hill (St. Andrew's) followed the Benedictine Rule. Furthermore, in his opinion, there are too many details in the RB that are at variance with what we read in *Dialogue II*. This internal evidence makes it unlikely that the author was familiar with the Rule. In my own view, the variations are not so striking as to rule out some connection. But the whole tone of the *Dialogues* is so different from the RB as to make one wonder. For example, the Rule never mentions miracles at all, and the *Dialogues* are full of them!

If St. Gregory evades the task of describing Benedict's character, he certainly does not skimp on the narration of his death. He speaks of "his very holy death," and every detail that he gives us corroborates that claim. Unlike almost all the other saints in the *Dialogues*, Benedict knows about his death long in advance and he knows about it in precise detail.[158] Indeed, it almost seems as if Benedict sort of stage-manages his own death by having his disciples open his tomb and carry him into the oratory to die. Far from being "snatched by death," he calmly summons death, and death obediently arrives to claim him.

Perhaps Gregory wishes to parallel Benedict's death with that of Jesus Christ. In fact, we can notice the following similarities: both die with their arms outstretched; both die praying; both make preparation for their death six days in advance;[159] both know the hour of their death, and finally both ascend into heaven. But perhaps the most remarkable language used for the death of Benedict that ties it to the death of Christ is found in the expression: "he breathed forth his last as he prayed." Although the term *spiritus* for the last breath is not so unusual, it rarely occurs in the *Dialogues*. But it does occur in famous passages of the gospels: Matthew 27:50 and John 19:30. So there is an apparent wish on Gregory's part to bring in Jesus Christ at this point.

It should be carefully noted, however, that the purpose of this comparison is not to make some kind of quasi-divine claim for Benedict. Instead of that, we can say that Gregory wants to *replace* Benedict with Christ at the end of his narrative. We remember that he did the same thing at the end of chapter VIII, which was the end of the Subiaco cycle. Now at the end of the larger Monte Cassino cycle, the same literary technique is employed. This point will be expanded further on.

In addition to being carefully planned, Benedict's death in this account can only be called spectacular. Of course, it is deeply pious in that he dies just after receiving the Viaticum of Holy Communion. But it is also made to look heroic by the fact that he dies standing up, praying with his arms raised to heaven. The person with a well-stocked biblical memory will immediately think of Moses praying for victory over the Amalekites in the desert of Sinai in Exodus 17:12. But Moses sits, and he does not die. Actually, there are a couple of other famous analogues to Benedict's death. When the tough old Roman emperor Vespasian came to die, he refused to lie down because "an emperor must die standing up."[80] Moreover, St. Martin of Tours was also like Benedict in that he insisted on praying all during his death agony. We know that Benedict loved St. Martin, for he named one of his chapels at Monte Cassino after him.[81] Like Martin, Benedict prays right up to the end.

We have seen that much about Benedict's death, or at least Gregory's account of it, conforms to other ancient descriptions. But there is one aspect of his passing that is so unique as to be almost shocking. I refer to the vision that two of his disciples are given at the time he is dying. Long before the final event, Gregory says that he explained to his disciples what would happen. This forewarning was also extended to disciples living at a distance, and he also showed them by "what sort of sign they would know his soul was leaving his body."

That is exactly what happened. Just after the saint died, Gregory tells us that two monks, one at Monte Cassino and another at a distance, saw a vision of a wonderful avenue stretching up to heaven. This marvelous street rose up to the east and was paved with rich carpets and lighted by lamps. At this point, the reader expects the narrator to complete the vision with the sight of Benedict's soul ascending this glorious avenue. After all, we have already been told about the souls of Scholastica and Germanus winging their way up to heaven. However, nothing more is said. It is as if the main protagonist is suddenly removed from the picture. Where is Benedict?[6]

That is connected to the question that is addressed to the two disciples by a mysterious man standing on the mystic roadway: They readily admit that they do not know where the road is leading or who will take it. Obviously, their naivete is calculated to draw forth the explanation that this is Benedict's road to heaven.[6] It is never explained, though, why there is no sign of the saint making his way on the heavenly road. The answer to that question will be dealt with in what remains of this chapter.

But first Gregory must add a few points to his presentation. First, he mentions rather brusquely and without elaboration that Benedict was buried at Monte Cassino in the chapel of John the Baptist. Then he rather quirkily feels that he must add yet another miracle to his account. The story concerns a madwoman who happened to wander into Benedict's old cave in the wilderness of Sublaco. Apparently, the place was still deserted and quite open to whoever happened to enter in. At any rate, this woman had absolutely no idea of what she was getting into. But when she came out in the morning, she was completely cured of her mental illness (or diabolical possession?).

Why must Gregory attach this fairly run-of-the-mill healing miracle to the life of his saint just after he has buried the

man? For the very good reason that this episode illustrates an important point he wishes to make before departing the story of Benedict. For Gregory, it is crucial that this miracle happened in a place where Benedict *wasn't*. Even though he had once lived there and that gave the place a certain aura, now his bones were located somewhere else (Monte Cassino). So the miracle happened entirely apart from his body, living or dead. It happened purely through his spiritual influence with almighty God.

But Gregory does not leave it at that. Not only *can* the saints and martyrs work[64] wonders apart from their bones, they are even more potent by their absence. Now we see what Gregory meant to symbolize with his odd omission of Benedict's soul from the vision of the stairway to heaven. In fact, Gregory is able to bolster this particular point with a powerful argument drawn directly from the Bible. In John 16:7, at the Last Supper before he dies and is taken to heaven, Jesus says this to the disciples: "If I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you." The profound spiritual significance of this remark is fully exploited by Gregory. To quote Vogüé, on whom this book has relied so heavily, "the meaning of the Life of Benedict, and of the Gregorian hagiography in its entirety, is to lead us from the admiration of the power of the saints to the spiritual love of Christ."

Seen in another way, it is better for us that we are separated from the body of Benedict and also the body of Jesus Christ. Although such an absence is hard for us in our present physical condition, it has the salutary effect of increasing our faith. For faith is precisely the gift of loving one who is not present and dwelling spiritually with one whom we cannot see. We may sometimes naïvely think that it would have been much better for us to have lived with Benedict and with Jesus, but not necessarily. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29).[65]

At the risk of ending this commentary on a sour or even frivolous note, the following corollary could be added. St. Gregory the Great is sometimes called "The Father of Medieval Christianity." Yet to judge from the influence of this final teaching of his in *Dialogue II*, he did not carry the day. For if there was anything that medieval Christians loved, it was the bones of the martyrs and saints. Moreover, the bones of St. Benedict eventually became a source of a famous controversy when the monks of the Abbey of Fleury in France claimed to have them in their possession.[166] To this day, there is a prominent reliquary of Benedict at Fleury (St. Benoît sur Loire), but the monks of Monte Cassino stoutly affirm that the authentic bones still reside on top their high hill in the Italian Campania.

Praised by innumerable monks and nuns on earth below, St. Benedict and St. Scholastica glory in the heavenly presence of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. [XXXVIII-4]

Notes

Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

[3] *Vie de saint Benoît* (Abbey of Bellefontaine, 1982). English translation: *The Life of St. Benedict* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's, 1993). In the English volume, the actual translation was done by Hilary Costello and Eoin de Bhaldraithe. Vogüe contributed the commentary.

[4] *Sources Chrétiennes* 251, 260 and 265 (Paris: Cerf, 1978–80).

[5] See G. Holzherr, "Der verborgene Schatz: zur Aktualität der Regula Benedicti," *Erbe und Auftrag* 4 (2007): 414n9.

[6] Found in *Sources Chrétiennes* 260, see note 3 above.

[7] For these sections, I have followed the divisions of Vogüe, *Life of Benedict*. See note 3 above.

[8] Gregory the Great, *The Life of Saint Benedict*, commentary by Adalbert de Vogüe (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's, 1993), 5. Henceforth, this basic text will be listed as Vogüe, *Life*.

[9] Vogüe, *Life*, 8.

[10] Ibid., 7.

[11] He had to learn that love supersedes discipline, at least in the Christian life.

[12] Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Anthony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995). This study claims that the *Letters*, which display a quite learned Origenist theology, are indeed from Antony himself.

[13] See Vogüe, *Life*, 9.

[14] Gregory the Great, *Dialogues II*, critical text and notes by Adalbert de Vogüé, *Sources Chrétiennes* 260 (Paris: Cerf, 1979), 131n3. Henceforth this volume will be cited as Vogüe, *Dialogue II*.

[11] Athanasius. *The Life of Anthony*, translation and introduction by Robert C. Gregg (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1980), chapter 8, p. 37.

[12] Vogüé, *Life*, 16.

[13] See Kassius Hallinger, "Papst Gregor und der Hl. Benedikt," in *Studia Anselmiana* 42 (1957): 231–319.

[14] Vogüé, *Life*, 16.

[15] Ibid., 15–16.

[16] *Conference* 21.29. RB 49 alludes to this opinion, but seems to consider it too idealistic.

[17] See Vogüé, *Life*, 18.

[18] Vogüé, *Life*, 22–23.

[19] Ibid., 23.

[20] Ibid., 26.

[21] Ibid., 21.

[22] *Life of Anthony*, 5, note 14 above.

[23] Vogüé, *Life*, 23.

[24] Cassian, *Conference* 12.V.

[25] Vogüé, *Life*, 27.

[26] Ibid., 35.

[27] Ibid., 36.

[28] Ibid., 37 ff.

[29] Vogüé cites Perseus, *Satires* IV.52.

[30] This is not an isolated sentiment of Benedict, but a key idea that occurs five different times in the Rule (RB 4.44–63; 7.10–14; 7.26–30; 7.63–64; 19.1–3). These ideas may well come to Benedict from Basil of Caesarea, whom he calls "our holy father" in 73.5. See Vogüé, *Life*, 39.

[31] See Vogüé, *Life*, 43–51.

[32] Ibid., 46.

[33] Ibid., 47.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 49.

[36] Actually, RB 46 comes down surprisingly hard on just these kinds of domestic accidents. It does not claim they are all due to carelessness, but it does demand they all be confessed and atoned for.

[37] Vogüé, *Life*, 48.

[38] See my remarks on sadness in *Benedict's Rule*, p. 261, note on RB 31.6. See also the thematic index under "Sadness."

[39] Vogüé, *Life*, 49.

[40] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., 55.

[45] Ibid., 56–57.

[46] Ibid., 55.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Vogüé makes this point in *Life*, 59–60.

[49] See Vogüé, *Life*, 56.

[50] Ibid., 18.

[51] Gregory the Great, *Letters*, II 26. See Vogüé, *Life*, 73.

[52] In her book *The Emergence of Monasticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 137, Marilyn Dunn points to this anomalous passage of the *Dialogue* as a clue that the work was actually written in the seventh century and probably in northern Europe. At that time and place, monastic pastoral work was the norm. This thesis has not found much support among scholars.

[53] The "citadel" (*castrum*) that Gregory mentions at Casinum was an older structure located about three kilometers southeast of the town of Cassino and also the pagan temple. These ruins exist to this day and are easily visible to the visitor taking the winding road up to the monastery.

[54] These bombs were in fact dropped by the Allies, a fact that has never been forgiven by the Italian monks.

[55] It is puzzling that Vogüé terms this miracle a "resurrection." But at least in English, the precise term should be "resuscitation," because the monk still had to die like everybody else.

[56] See Vogüé, *Life*, 72.

[57] Ibid.

[58] *Vita Martini Turonensis*, Pl. 20.159; CSEL 1; SC 133, 135; English, FC 7. Vogüé, *Life*, 68–70.

[59] Hom. *in Ezek.* I.1; cited in Vogüé, *Life*, 79.

[60] Of course, some scholars such as Kassius Hallinger maintain that Gregory did not in fact know the Rule of Benedict. If that is the case, he cannot be faulted for contradicting it. See note 16 above.

[61] See Vogüé, *Life*, 81.

[62] Ibid.

[63] VM 21.5, cited in Vogüé, *Life*, 78.

[64] These references are found in great abundance in Vogüé's main work on the *Dialogues*, *Sources Chrétiennes* 260 (Paris: Cerf, 1979).

[65] As a matter of fact, the Goths had ruled Italy for about fifty years before the Byzantines attempted to retake the peninsula. Led by their great king, Theodoric, they provided a creditable level of public order before the outbreak of the terrible Gothic War of 535–52. As for the

Arianism of the Goths, there are scholars who now say that they were not nearly as heretical as the Byzantines claimed.

[*] Vogüé, *Life*, 85.

[*] Ibid., 90–91.

[*] In *Dial.* III.5 we learn more about Sabinus. See Vogüé, *Life*, 91.

[*] *Hom. in Ezek.* II.6.22 ff. Of course, I am indebted to Vogüé, *Life*, 92, for this reference. Who else would be able to pinpoint a reference in this huge, untranslated body of Gregorian homilies? Vogüé also recalls that in his Prologue to *Dialogue II*, Gregory already insists that Benedict saw through the glory of Rome. "Benedict despised the world still in bloom, as if it were already withered." It can be no accident that he repeats the very same phrase in XV.3. This is a further proof that for Gregory, the prophecy concerning Rome was of consuming interest.

[*] In *Dial.* III.8, we also learn that Constantius had the gift of prophecy. Apparently these sixth-century Italian bishops were a remarkable lot! We can also recall that Aquino was the hometown of St. Thomas Aquinas. To this day the small city is just below the hill of Monte Cassino to the northwest.

[*] Vogüé, 94–95, comments that even though Benedict was supposedly purified of his passions through his struggles at Subiaco, apparently the job was not quite completed. Rather than clucking his tongue, the great French commentator admits that this outburst of Benedict endears him to the reader. Vogüé also notes that Benedict's grief is really the fruit of his righteous anger, a connection that the modern reader may find puzzling but also enlightening.

[*] See Vogüé, *Life*, 95.

[*] Ibid., 96.

[*] The verb in Latin is *abscondit*, which normally means "to hide." But I am not sure that it always has to have a pejorative connotation. The fact that the monk did not even remember that he was carrying the napkins seems to indicate that he did not take the matter very seriously. But maybe that is just the point!

[*] Vogüé, *Life*, 97. Probably the most telling passage is found in 2 Kgs 5:25: "Where have you been, Gehazi?" "... nowhere." Who can read this without thinking of Adam and Eve in the Garden?

[*] Actually, RB 54 does call for the "discipline of the Rule" for such offences.

[*] Vogüé, *Life* 102–3.

[77] *Institutes* 5–12. This list, which goes back even further into Greco-Roman philosophical thought, is actually Cassian's transmission of that found in the works of Evagrius Ponticus (*Praktikos, de Octo Vitiis*).

[78] Mark 2:8 shows Jesus intuiting the resentment of the Pharisees toward his forgiveness of sins. In response, he heals the cripple's paralysis.

[79] HM 1. The English translation is found in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1981). Gregory could have known this text, since it was already translated from Greek into Latin by his time (perhaps by Rufinus of Aquileia), but most of the details are quite different. See Vogüé, *Life*, 104.

[80] Vogüé, *Life*, 106.

[81] See my article "Benedict's Prior: RB 65" in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 40:2 (2005).

[82] One scholar who insisted that he did not was Kassius Hallinger, "Papst Gregory," note 16 above: 231–319. Hallinger's point was that it took a long time for Benedict's Rule and the cult of the saint to spread out from Monte Cassino.

[83] HM 1. See Vogüé, *Life*, 108.

[84] Vogüé, at least, is not impressed with this miracle. He rather uncharacteristically comments that Gregory seems here to be dealing with trivialities. Why could Benedict not make the short journey to Terracina? Surely it would be normal for a founding abbot to do just that. He speculates that Gregory may imply that Benedict had made some kind of vow of seclusion whereby he would not leave the monastery of Monte Cassino.

[85] Vogüé, *Life of Benedict*, 109. Indicates that this sort of piling up of superfluous wonders has its limits.

[86] This particular insight is entirely due to Vogüé, *Life*, 110, who is a past-master in discerning the large structures of ancient documents.

[87] This is the term coined by Vogüé, *Life*, 112.

[88] The literary analysis presented in the next two paragraphs comes from Vogüé, *Life*, 114–15.

[89] In fact, Vogüé says it in his full commentary on the *Dialogues* in *Sources Chrétiennes* 260 (Paris: Cerf, 1979): 206–7.

[90] See for example, "Saint Benedict's Biography and the Turning Tide of Controversy," *American Benedictine Review* 3 (2002): 305–25.

[91] Vogüé, *Life*, 121, cites the case of the bishop of Thessalonika, who in the year 519 advised the people of his diocese to take home ample

supplies of the Holy Eucharist in view of a persecution that was imminent. He found this information in *Collectio Avellana* 186. 4 (*Indiculus* of Bishop John): 225. 7.

[91] Vogüé, *Dial.* II. 211n. cites the following provincial councils that condemned this practice: Hippo (393) c. 4; Auxerre (561–605) c. 12; *In Trullo* (692) c. 83.

[92] Vogüé, *Dial.* II. 207n4. points out that the admonition of the deacon before Communion was not the same as the dismissal of the catechumens at the offertory. Here it is a question of baptized persons who are barred from Eucharist. This ritual is found in several ancient Roman documents, including *Ordo Rom.* I. 99 and 108; *Sacram. Gelas.* III. 16 (1260).

[93] Vogüé, *Life*, 118–19, discusses the case of Pope Gelasius, who in 495 refused to absolve the excommunicated patriarch Acacius of Constantinople on the grounds that he, the Pope, had no power to change the spiritual conditions of persons in the next life. See PL 59. 59bc; *Collectio Avellana* 101.8. In the light of this, we can only find it remarkable that Gregory should transmit a story that flies in the face of ordinary church teaching.

[94] At this point, Vogüé, *Life*, 117, seems somewhat oppressed by the miraculous elements: "Visions and dreams, demons and ghosts, are so plentiful in that section (*Dialogue IV*) as to give the strange impression of unceasing communion between this world and the other . . . . Then, as now, the reader continues to wonder whether those are purely imaginary representations or more or less consistent objects, and most often Gregory skillfully avoids answering this question."

[95] Vogüé, *Life*, 120.

[96] See my article entitled "People Storage" in *Cistercian Studies* 26 (1991): 40–52. It might be added that this attitude endured until the Second Vatican Council. Any departure from the monastery was considered a sort of disgrace for all parties concerned. Even now, in our liberated age, monastic departures are often accompanied by hard feelings that depend more on human psychology than on any objective spiritual or theological principles.

[97] My reference to the devil here is not casual but specific to the text of the RB 58.28, which says that the monk "gives in to the suggestion of the devil" when he leaves.

[98] We may remember the case of the monk at Subiaco who was constantly driven out of the choir by a little black boy, again the devil in disguise. See *Dial.* II.IV. In that story, nobody but Benedict can see the devil, but Maur is finally granted the vision after a couple days of prayer.

[80] *The Gregorian Dialogues and the Origins of Benedictine Monasticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 235.

[81] Vogüé, *Life*, 129.

[82] According to *Dial.* I.9, 10–13, twelve *solidi* were the price of a horse. See Vogüé, *Dial.* II.215n1.

[83] At least that is the suggestion of Vogüé, *Life*, 130.

[84] See *Dial.* II.XXI.

[85] All this is in compliance with RB 31, which does not permit the cellarer to override the orders of the abbot. But one can understand the predicament of the bursar when the superior is one of those saints who tends to give away not only the shirt off his own back, but the shirts off the backs of the community. A modern case like this can be seen in Cardinal Dusmet, OSB, who was the despair of his own bursar in Catania. See *Cardinal Giuseppi Dusmet, A Sicilian Borromeo* (London, 1938).

[86] See Vogüé, *Life*, 139.

[87] Ibid.

[88] *Transiens parumentum loci in quo incubuerant.* Unlike modern people, the ancients thought nothing of prostrating full length on the floor in prayer. Indeed, this seems to be implied by the teaching of RB 20.5: "In community, however, prayer should always be brief; and when the superior gives the signal, all should rise together." The reference is probably to prostrating *during* the Divine Office. See Kardong, *Benedict's Rule*, 217.

[89] The author stayed at Monte Cassino for a week in 1976. I remember that even in my second-story room, the outside wall was at least five feet thick. When I closed the shutters for my siesta, I had to use a blanket. Even though it was ninety degrees outside, there was still enough chill in those thick walls in June to produce an icebox effect. And I remember gazing down on the cliffs below, thinking of Benedict's oil flask.

[90] *Inst.* 4.25. This is the same John who figures prominently in the *Lausiac History* of Palladius. See note 80 above. See Vogüé, *Life*, 132.

[91] Thus RB 43.7 wants those who come late to Office to be publicly shamed. See my article entitled "Coming Late: Benedict's Prohibition against Tardiness," *Regulae Benedicti Studia* 18 (1994): 115–27. See also my article, "The Healing of Shame in the Rule of Benedict," *American Benedictine Review* 53:4 (December 2002): 453–74.

[92] See Sulpicius Severus, *Dial.* II.1–2. The reader should not be confused by this reference to *Dial.* II, since Sulpicius labeled his book the same as that of Gregory. But two hundred years separated them, Sulpicius writing in about AD 405 and Gregory in AD 593. See Vogüé, *Life*, 133.

[8] *Vita Martini* 6.1. See Vogüé, *Life*, 136.

[9] See *Dial. II*, VIII.11.

[10] In Deacon Peter's question that inaugurates this section, he speaks of "willpower" (*voluntatis . . . nutu*), but it soon becomes plain that Gregory really means power bestowed by God.

[11] This structural analysis is that of Vogüé, *Life*, 143–44.

[12] Vogüé is certainly worthy of that description, as he proves in his discussion of this chiasmic material in *Life*, 145–47.

[13] Here the structure is not continuous but spread over twenty chapters (XI–XXXII), so it is not at all obvious. But Vogüé shows that there is also a *secondary* chiasm operating here—namely, resurrection, humiliated, multiplied, humiliated, resurrection.

[14] As some examples, Vogüé, *Life*, 152n7, lists Lupicinus, Columban, and Eligius as saints who freed prisoners from their chains. On page 147, Vogüé lists the following saints as successful intercessors for prisoners: Martin, Severinus, Caesarius, Fortunatus, Paulinus, and Sanctulus.

[15] Vogüé, *Life*, 148, is critical of Gregory's use of this parallel. But he does not invoke Exodus as a better biblical parallel.

[16] Perhaps the incongruity of this story, and even its terrible harshness, can be partly attributed to the literary genre of the Acts of the Apostles. At least in some sections, it has the quality of picaresque folktales where not too much attention is paid to the overall effect of the story. If it makes a point, the reader is expected to overlook a lot of unpleasant side effects.

[17] In his article entitled "Donation, Dedication, and *Damnatio Memoriae*: The Catholic Reconciliation of Ravenna and the Church of Sant Apollinare Nuovo," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13.1 (2005): 71–110. Arthur Urbano says that some of the Gothic reputation for theological heterodoxy is due to prejudice of the Byzantine historians who report on them. In other words, we mostly know about the Goths from their enemies. Of course, Pope Gregory was able to make his own judgments on them, but he also probably thought of them in terms of the Lombard invaders who made his own era so miserable.

[18] In *Dialogue III* 18.1–2, another monk named Benedict is beaten up by Gothic highwaymen. And Victor de Vita tells us in *De persec. Vand.* 1.1–2, that the Arian Vandals destroyed churches and other Catholic buildings. They also tortured and killed the clergy for their gold. For these references, see Vogüé, *Dial. II*, 223, note on XXXI.

[14] The text is in 1 Kgs 17:17–24. Vogüé, *Life*, 151, says that this is probably the biblical story that most influenced Gregory's tale. In both cases, the saint prays after acting: Elijah breathes on the child and Benedict prostrates on the child. It might be added that Elijah chides Yahweh for letting the child die. But of course this child was the earlier gift of God to a barren and aged mother. Benedict has no such history with the son of the peasant.

[15] One might be tempted to think that the two stories from Kings are varieties of the same incident. But the tale of Elisha is much more detailed and puts heavy emphasis on the physical actions of the prophet. Not only does he prostrate, he breathes on several parts of the body, walks around, and so on. Previous to this, Elisha sent his servant to deal with the problem, but he could do nothing.

[16] In this sentence I make the distinction between resurrection and resuscitation. Strictly speaking, the former is a definitive spiritual event wherein the dead person is raised to everlasting life. As for the latter, the resuscitated person is restored to normal earthly life where she must still die like everyone else.

[17] Vogüé, *Life*, 151, makes this claim, and he knows the monastic literature as well as any historian alive today.

[18] *Life of Martin*, 7–8; *Dial.* II, 4.

[19] The story of Ilbertinus occurs in *Dial.* I, 2, 8. That of Fortunatus is found in *Dial.* I, 10.

[20] It should be recalled that Benedict also raised a dead youngster in chapter XI, 1. But that resuscitation was curiously muted and barely described at all. Perhaps the young monk was only temporarily stunned. At any rate, that miracle did not happen in the strategic last position where it serves as a culmination of all the miracles.

[21] Vogüé, *Life*, 155–56.

[22] Paul and David are discussed in XVI, 3–9, while Nathan and Elisha are the subject of the discussion in XXI, 3–5.

[23] Benedict is not the only one who finds Scholastica's request out of place. Although he is generally appreciative of Scholastica's role as "one who loves more," Vogüé seems to slip back into the traditional male view of her as "self-willed and capricious." In other words, he fundamentally agrees with Benedict! See Vogüé, *Life*, 160.

[24] There is no absolute prohibition in RB against the monk remaining outside the monastery overnight. Indeed, monks often had to make long journeys that took them away for days and weeks. But whether the journey

was short or long, the precept of RB 66.7 is important: "then there will be no need for the monks to roam outside, because this is not at all good for their souls." In this case, of course, there was no compelling reason (except love) to remain out overnight since the guesthouse was so close.

[106] *Dial.* II.III.1–4.

[107] That seems to be the case in the story of the wayward nuns (XXIII) and the vagrant monk (XXIV). In both cases the offenders die in their sins and cannot find rest in the grave. Benedict absolves them all, but it was his warning that caused their unrest in the first place. Obviously, Gregory believes that the abbot was right.

[108] One is reminded here of the end of the RB itself, where chapter 73 insists that the Rule is merely a sketch for beginners. To go beyond the rudiments, Benedict refers the reader to other spiritual masters such as Basil and Cassian and the *Lives of the Fathers*. They will show the way of perfection. But not everything in those writers points toward love. Sometimes they are as legalistic as Benedict.

[109] Since Vogüé, *Life*, 161, makes this comparison, I feel a bit less churlish in doing so.

[110] Vogüé, *Life*, 167. Benedict's dates can be roughly computed from the encounter with Totila (*Dial.* II.XV.1) that must have happened around 547 since he invaded Rome in that year. Another possible link with world history may be seen in the figure of Liberius, who is said to be the founder of Servandus' monastery in Campania. In *Ep.* 9.73, Gregory refers to a Liberius who had lived in Naples. This same man was prefect of Gaul in 515–33, so Liberius could have founded a monastery in Italy in the period under discussion here.

[111] Vogüé, *Life*, 166.

[112] Latin: *Despexit iam quasi aridum mundum cum flore*. The verb *despexit* is made up of the prefix *de* (down) plus *spicere* (look). The English derivative is *despise*.

[113] As Vogüé sharply points out in *Life*, 169, *mundus* here does not just mean "earth" but the whole of creation, including the heavens.

[114] I must confess that my translation of XXXV.7 does look like just this: "It shows her how narrow are all things below." This renders the Latin: *Et quam angusta essent omnia inferiora monstravit*. Of course, Gregory means to say that the things of God are incomparably greater than his creation. But "narrow" does not mean despicable.

[115] This story is found in Gregory's *Homilies on the Gospels* 34.18. Critical edition: CCSL 141, 1999, R. Etaix.

[146] I do not want to claim that *I myself* am reminded, since I do not know classical literature all that well. In fact, even Vogüé based his remarks here on a couple of earlier articles: T. Delforge, "Songe de Scipion et vision de saint Benoît," *Revue Bénédictine* 69 (1959): 351–54 (352); P. Courcelle, "La vision cosmique de saint Benoît," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 13 (1967): 97–117 (110–14).

[147] In fact, Scipio revealed in 129 BC that he had this dream in 149 BC. But even after twenty years he remembered it vividly. One does not forget such dreams!

[148] Jerome, *Ep.* 60.18.2. The reference in *De Republica* is 6.8.26. English translation: C. W. Keyes, *Loeb Classical Library* 533 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

[149] My remarks here depend on Vogüé's profound analysis of this comparison in his *Life*, 169–72.

[150] I must admit that the phrase "he saw a small part of the light" (*partemque lucis exiguam vidit*) leaves me a bit bemused. Precisely how did he know it was a lesser light than what Benedict saw? Probably it is not wise to press such details too hard.

[151] We also know that Gregory himself several times calls on witnesses to corroborate his stories in the *Dialogues*. Still, this does not prove conclusively that the stories are *historically* reliable.

[152] Without giving a reference, Vogüé, *Life*, 171, mentions that Origen also speculates that souls are spherical. No doubt this can be attributed to his Platonism.

[153] *Vita Antonii* 60, see note 14 above.

[154] This discussion is based on Vogüé's remarks in *Life*, 176–77.

[155] I discuss these passages under the rubric "Controlled Passion" in my book, *The Benedictines* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1988), 50–55. For his part, Vogüé, *Life*, 177, suggests that *discretio* can mean "careful scrutiny." Thus RB 58 wants the novice master to carefully examine the candidate to see if he has the right qualities for monastic living.

[156] On the other hand, the sheer variety of quoted and alluded sources employed in the RB shows that its writer was fairly well read. Vogüé, *Life* 177, manages to find an edifying moral to all this. He says that God may have rewarded the saint for his renunciation of the world by endowing him with special literary abilities. That may be true, but it should not influence anyone else to shortcut their studies.

[157] "Papst Gregor und der hl. Benedikt." See note 16 above. Hallinger was also able to show that the cult of St. Benedict only made its

historical appearance long after the time of Pope Gregory. See "Development of the Cult and Devotion to St. Benedict," *American Benedictine Review* 36:2 (1985): 195–214.

[84] See Vogüé, *Life*, 178–80.

[85] See John 12:1–7.

[86] Suetonius, *Lives* 24. English translation: J. C. Rolfe, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944–50). Vespasian was concerned about civic virtue and not his future with almighty God.

[87] Vogüé, *Life*, 179–80, points out that Martin's deathbed ordeal lasted for six full days, during which he refused to rest at all. In contrast, Benedict's passage takes place quickly. There is little struggle involved.

[88] This remarkable detail of the account is discussed by Vogüé, *Life*, 180–81.

[89] Such dialogues between angels and men are not uncommon in the Bible. One of the most famous occurs in Revelation 7:13–14, where the by-standers are asked about the identity of the 144,000 saints in white robes. The same basic pattern recurs: Q. Who are they? A. You, sir, are the one who knows. Explanation: They are the ones . . .

[90] Vogüé, *Life*, 184.

[91] The fact that Gregory downplays the grave of Benedict at Monte Cassino runs along the same lines as this argument for faith without bones, or even without miracles. But it is also well to remember that by the time Gregory wrote (ca. AD 590), the Lombards had already destroyed Monte Cassino. So whatever funeral monument was there, it was no longer a suitable site of pilgrimage.

[92] According to the legend, Fleury sent a party of monks to rescue the bones of Benedict and Scholastica from the ruins of Monte Cassino in the seventh century before the place was restored in about AD 720. At that time, it is said in France, no one was visiting the grave, so it was better for the bones of Benedict to have a decent shrine in Fleury. Of course, Monte Cassino has always believed that it possesses the bones. When Monte Cassino was excavated after it was bombed flat in World War II, bones were found that are now said to be the bones of Benedict and Scholastica. It all depends on whom you talk to.

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